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DROPPING INTO THE DUNGEON, NEW YORK NAT BEHELD THE FORM OF A MAN LYING BELOW.

OR, EX FERRET

SYKES' BOLD GAME.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "NEW YORK NAT" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE EXILED FERRET.

"At last! at last! The game is mine, for I have tracked them!"

"I will hound them down until I make them tremble with fear, while I revel in the gold they have hoarded up."

"Banish me, did they!"

"Send me an exile into foreign lands, to wander about, poor, destitute and alone."

"They did not suspect that there was an awakening to their dream of security, and that I would dare return!"

"How well I remember, now, how New York Nat held me a prisoner for long weeks in that old haunted house, a huge dog my guardian, and with no chance of escape.

"How it comes back to me, now, how they took me by night on board that ship bound for China, and exiled me, a mere boy then, to foreign lands, because I sought to better myself by betraying the band of Ferrets, Boy Police, as they were pleased to call themselves.

"But the three years that I have been away have made a man of me, for I am twenty, now, a youth in years, but old in bitter experience.

"I have laid by my hard earnings for this day, when I could stand again in New York and be their master!"

"Now, after weeks of shadowing, I have tracked them to their new lair!"

"They are prospering immensely—these Unknown Ferrets, for they have given up their haunts in graveyards and old haunted rookeries, and live in yonder really elegant mansion, or at least New York Nat lives there, and it is the rendezvous of the Ferret band.

"Now to gain admission there by some means; and, once I do so, my fortune is made!"

The speaker was a youth, for, as he had said, he was but twenty years of age; but his face was bearded, and there was the stamp of sin upon it which made him appear older.

He was well dressed, his clothes being of an English cut and of a rather loud appearance, while he wore a glass in one eye and carried a cane.

As he had stood and mused half aloud, the expression upon his face was triumphant, but full of evil and bitterness.

He was upon an upper street in New York City, near Central Park, and where the houses were somewhat scattering.

The one opposite to his position was apart from the others, and a corner building of pretentious appearance, a large double house of five stories, with the usual high basement.

It had the appearance of having once been an elegant house, but for some reason had been deserted.

There was a sign upon the front door, stating that a professor of music occupied the first floor. The professor's going to live there had surprised those who knew the history of the mansion, for it had a history and a bad one, as several murders and strange deaths had occurred there, according to common report.

The owner of the property dwelt abroad, and the agent had been glad to rent it to the music teacher, furnished as it was, for a very moderate price.

It was thought by the few who interested themselves in the affairs of the professor, who appeared to be a youthful looking German, that he had a fairly large class of young students, as quite a number of youths and maidens had been seen going into the mansion at different times.

More than that nothing was known of the professor or his home.

For some time the young man across the street had stood watching the house, lost in reverie.

Half a square away ran a thoroughfare that was a good deal traveled, and suddenly the youth said, as though some plan of action had just dawned upon him:

"I will do it, and go slow, for too much haste may ruin all. New York Nat, young as he is, is about the shrewdest and most daring fellow I know.

"If he discovers me, and I fall a second time into his power, I may fare worse than being exiled, for by this time the Unknown Ferrets may have learned to kill when their interests demand it.

"I can afford to wait, now that I am again in New York, and have shadowed the Unknowns to their den.

"Yes, I will get a push cart and load it with fruit. Yonder corner shall be my stand, and a couple of weeks will show me just who enters the place, and advise me when no one is there.

"But that dog. Have they got that vicious brute yet, I wonder?"

"It makes me shudder to think of him, and I must go slow, for to enter there with him on guard would be to throw my life away.

"Never mind! I'll first go into the fruit business, study my plan of action, learn all I can, and then—act!"

"Ah! Who is this?"

The young man, a self-confessed exile, returned for revenge, moved on toward the one he saw advancing.

It was a handsome youth of eighteen, dressed in a neat, but negligé style, and with a form at once athletic and graceful.

His face was a fine one—intelligent, handsome and full of daring and strength—strangely so for one of his apparent years.

He merely glanced at the other as they passed, but there was much in the quick, searching glance he gave, which seemed to read one through and through.

It caused the other to turn pale, while from between his lips came the muttered words:

"New York Nat, the captain of the Unknown Ferrets, by all that's holy.

"By Heaven! He seemed to look into my very soul.

"I must be careful, for if he recognizes me as on his track my life will not be worth anything!"

"Dare I look back?"

He glanced quickly back behind him, and, as he walked on, said:

"Yes, he has entered the Unknown Ferrets' den.

"It was New York Nat."

CHAPTER II.

THE YOUNG PRISONER'S PLEDGE.

The youth who the shadower had said was New York Nat ascended the steps of the brown stone mansion and entered the double doors with a pass key.

As he stepped within the inner door a huge dog came down the stairs to greet him, a look on his savage face which betokened that he was ready to greet a foe if the one who entered had been such.

"Ah, Guard, always on the alert, I see, especially since we had the misunderstanding some time ago, when you forgot your duty and accepted pay from a prisoner.

"But that was only one act of back-sliding on your part. Had you been human you would have been guilty of serious sin, my old pard!"

The dog seemed to understand the words of his young master, for at first he drooped his tail and looked sheepish, then brightened at the praise bestowed at last.

Up the stairs they went together to the top floor, where a center room was used as a prison.

There was an entrance to this room only through a large closet, and the only means of light and air was by a skylight in the roof.

The room held scant furniture—a table, easy chair, an iron cot bed and some books.

Upon the cot lay a youth, in irons.

His ankles were manacled, and a chain of length enough to enable him to move about the room was made fast to the iron cot.

He was a youth with a face by no means prepossessing, and it had an ugly expression upon it as he saw that he was to have a visitor.

"Rip, Keno will bring you your dinner, but I have come to have a talk with you," and the visitor sat down in the easy chair.

"Going to tell me that I've got to be kilt, I s'pose," growled the prisoner.

"Oh, no! We are crook catchers, trying secretly, as you know, to put down lawlessness. We do not intend to become law breakers by taking your life, though you did try to sell us out to the police.

"Now, you, as one of us, know well that this band was formed for a good purpose, and though many of the members had been law breakers, they reformed and are working hard for pardon."

"And dust," sneered the prisoner.

"Oh, yes; we are not working for nothing, and the rewards we have won foot up a handsome sum to our credit.

"We have made a good record, as you know, as the Unknown Crook Catchers, and we hope before very long to let the Chief of the Secret Service and the Superintendent of Police know who we are, and ask for pardon, those who have to do so, for past offenses against the law.

"But until we get ready to do so, we intend to maintain our secrecy, as it is absolutely necessary we should do. You sought to betray us, but in doing so you took the life of a crook who was our prisoner.

"This act would hang you, so you dare not now betray us; but I do not wish to hold you a prisoner here, not only for your sake, but for ours, so I am willing to make terms with you."

"What terms?"

"The same that I did with Sykes, the only other of our band who, like you, proved a traitor."

"Yer sent him off."

"Yes, sent him aboard a vessel sailing for China, giving him his share of what we had saved up in rewards at the time of his going."

"Hain't yer never heard of him?"

"No; and I hope we never shall; though, strange to say, as I came home just now I met a man who reminded me of him.

"But I do not think he will dare come back here, as I have the same hold on him I have on you."

"What's that?"

"He, too, had committed murder, so dared not, for his own sake, betray us, for I could hang him."

"I see."

"Now I am willing to offer you terms."

"Shout, Captain New York Nat, I'll hear 'em!"

"There are, as you know, a band of thirty of us, from boys of thirteen to twenty-one, our Girl Mascot, or Queen, and myself, and we are all working in a good cause and for money.

"Mr. Sherman Canfield, the gentleman whose life I saved, and who stands between us and the Secret Service chief, I saw this morning, and he learned from the Chief that he holds in rewards for us just eighty thousand dollars, earned in the past three years.

"Besides this, our Girl Queen, as treasurer, has a sum in keeping of fifteen thousand dollars, and by our rules of division, you would get two thousand dollars.

"I am ready to give you this sum, go with you on board a ship that sails around Cape Horn for Australia in two

weeks, if you will leave the country and pledge yourself not to return within three years."

"I'll do it, Nat—glad to get the ticket-of-leave!"

"Then, at our next meeting, you must take the pledge before the band, and if you break it and return, I will have you arrested for the murder of the escaped convict who was my prisoner here, and whom you intended to release, as you told him you would, and at the same time to betray us."

"I'll take ther pledge, and you bet I don't come back until my hair turns gray."

"All right; you know the consequences if you do."

New York Nat left the prisoner and, going to a well-furnished room on another floor, began to change to a different looking person from what he was when he entered the house.

When he went out, an hour after, no one would ever have recognized the handsome youth, so completely had he disguised himself.

CHAPTER III. THE SHADOWER.

"Yes, I've got to go slow, for New York Nat's got ther keenest eye I ever saw, and he seemed fairly to look through and through me.

"I'll wait and see how long he stays in the house, and if any of the others of the band go in or come out."

It was the shadower who thus mused, the same one who had said he intended to make money by betraying the band of Boy Ferrets to the Secret Service officers.

He seemed to know well that they had gained the envy, if not the ill will, of the police by their secret work, and all that they had accomplished, while they so well kept their identity hidden as to baffle the most astute men on the force.

For over an hour he waited; then he saw some one come out of the house.

"That's not Nat; but I'll see if I know him," and the shadower crossed over so as to meet him face to face.

But again he got a look which, though through spectacles, actually seemed to thrill him, and as he went on he muttered:

"It was New York Nat, for that look betrayed him! I never saw any one else who could look like that.

"But who would know him, all rigged up as he is like a German professor?"

"Ah! He has stopped, and I must make myself scarce about here, for now it is twice that he has seen me and that is once too many times.

"But he'll never know me in my disguise of a Dago, with a fruit push cart—not much he won't!

"He seems to be watching me, and to get him on my track is to be run down, as sure as he suspects me of shadowing him.

"Ah! There comes a hack. I'll stop it and get out of this."

He had just turned the corner and discerned a cab coming toward him; so at once he ran to meet it, found it had no passenger, and, springing in, called out:

"Turn about quick and drive for the Forty-second Street Ferry with all speed."

The driver did so, and the cab was just turning the nearest corner when New York Nat appeared at the other street.

"Ah! I was right, for he has run off in that hack, and I cannot catch him now; but it was Sykes beyond a doubt! I'll put the band at once upon his track, for if he has come back to New York he

means mischief, and the Unknown Ferrets are not ready to be betrayed yet."

Meanwhile, the shadower was glancing back out of the little glass window in the rear of the vehicle, and had seen New York Nat turn the corner.

"He's on to me, sure, for he was going in the other direction; but this dodge saved me, and in the disguise of a Dago I'll be safe, even from his never-failing eyes.

"Now to go to a costumer's and get a make-up that will transform me into an Italian, and fortunately my six months' stay in Italy enabled me to learn a few choice oaths and expressions of the Dagos."

The hackman did not drive to the ferry, as at first ordered, his passenger telling him he found he was too late to catch the train he expected to, and so he went to a costumer's upon Union Square.

There the shadower made what purchases he needed, a wig of jet black hair, false eyebrows to make his own black and heavy, a velvet jacket, corduroy pants, stout boots and a striped woolen shirt.

His next stopping place was at a downtown retail and supply fruit trader's, who kept peddlers out on the street.

Of him he bought a push cart and a lot of fruit, with a night lamp.

A short search found him a boarding house up-town, which he said he wanted for a friend, and procuring his license to peddle fruit, he sought his new quarters, carrying his sailor's kit along from the hotel where he had been stopping.

Telling the landlady of the house that he would wait and let his friend in, whom he expected soon, he set to work "making up" and soon had completely disguised himself.

When the landlady saw him, an hour after, she failed to recognize in the "Dago" the "gentleman" who had engaged the room, her best one, for "a friend."

Early the next morning the push cart was delivered, with a lot of choice fruits upon it, and after breakfast the shadower began to patrol the neighborhood near the home of the Unknown Ferrets.

He stood at a corner where the most people passed, and which commanded a view of the Ferrets' den, so that he could see all who went into or left the residence, and he smiled grimly as he muttered:

"Now, New York Nat, I'll soon know all about you and your Secret Boy Police, as you used to call yourselves; then I'll sell you out, taking good care not to incriminate myself in doing so.

"Then I'll get my revenge, and a big price, too."

He had hardly uttered the words when a young girl came along, saw the tempting fruit, halted and bought quite a supply.

"That was a very beautiful girl!" muttered the pretended Dago.

Then, as he saw her ascend the steps of the Ferrets' retreat, he cried:

"Why, she has gone in there, and she has a key, too!"

"I never saw the face of our Girl Queen—none of us ever did, save New York Nat, for she always appeared masked before us; but, as she has gone in there, she has betrayed herself.

"Yes, she is the Girl Queen of the Unknown Ferrets!"

"Ha! ha! ha! I am doing well, indeed, as a shadower," and he seemed exceedingly well pleased with his discovery.

CHAPTER IV. THE MEETING.

What a motley crew it was that gathered in the lair of the Unknown Ferrets

the night of the regular meeting of the clan.

It was an assemblage such as can only be found in the great American city of New York.

There were all sizes, ages and conditions of youths—boys who had been born in a cellar and reared in the slums; boys who had been born in elegant homes and nursed in luxury, but whom uncertain circumstances had brought to the slums, or whose own evil deeds had been their undoing.

But, under the influence of their young leader, and their Vailed Mascot, or Queen, unknown and a mystery to them all, they were on the road to perfect redemption and reformation, and that only two of these gamins, in three whole years, had proven a traitor to their cause and their comrades, proved how well that redemption had worked.

They were secret workers, and, though dodging the police themselves, they were doing the very work which only too often the officers of the law failed to do, for reasons they could not have explained.

There were bootblacks, telegraph and telephone messengers, newsboys, hall-boys in hotels, wharf rats, a sailor or two, a couple of young Chinamen who had a laundry, one clerk at Police Headquarters, and "Loafer Ferrets," whose duty it was to patrol the city in search of crime, crooks and suspects.

They had come together in their lair at the call of New York Nat, their young captain, and in the assembly room of the house they awaited his orders, seated in silence, facing him and their Girl Mascot, who was masked.

They had assembled, one, two and three at a time, and had admitted themselves with pass keys, which all had; while Guard, the dog sentinel, had met all at the door to welcome them and see that there were no impostors in the crowd.

But, shrewd as they were, they had not discovered a foe in the Italian fruit vender, who, with his push cart, was near their lair, a lantern revealing his tempting display, while some of them had been led to halt and purchase from him.

But he had his eye upon the door of the long deserted and ill-omened residence, and counted each one who went in there.

He saw the Girl Queen enter first, then the others, and he recognized some who had been members when he was one of the clan, before he had turned traitor.

"Well, if those two Heathen Chinees haven't gone in there I'll give up!" he exclaimed, as two young Chinamen who had bought bananas from him had been seen to ascend the steps of the mansion and pass inside.

"I suppose they go as music pupils, as the sign on the door reads; but I should hate to hear them sing."

Next, a young Hebrew came along, halted, bought a bag of peanuts, and was seen to go into the house.

"What, a Jew, too?"

"The band of Ferrets is reaching out. Next I'll expect to see that the band has roped in a nigger, for they've got mighty near every race on earth since I left 'em.

"But I've got 'em down fine, and I'll get a big price when I sell them out. Yes, and have a sweet revenge, too, Mister New York Nat."

While the pretended Italian was talking to himself the Ferret clan had assembled in the mansion, and, called to order by Captain Nat, they had transacted the regular business of the meeting, made their reports, been paid their weekly wages by the Girl Queen, who was treasurer and secretary, and then had heard

what had been decided upon regarding the prisoner.

"It seems cruel to keep him here, week after week. We have not the right to punish him, and so he has agreed to my terms if I would allow him to go away on a sailing vessel that leaves in a couple of weeks, and will not reach port for months.

"It would be more than half a year before he could return, even by steamer, and then you must know he dare not betray us, as he murdered the escaped convict, Fatal Fred, whom we captured and held as a prisoner here; and no matter what the fellow was, Rip was guilty of putting him to death to get him out and receive the reward offered for him, dead or alive, but which we thwarted.

"Now, I wish the consent or refusal of the band as to whether Rip's pledge should be taken and he be allowed to go, as I have stated."

So had New York Nat addressed the clan of young Ferrets, and with perfect confidence in their captain, the boys had unanimously voted to thus get rid of their troublesome customer, though some did not think he should be allowed his share of the money.

But New York Nat argued that this was the best means of getting rid of him and keeping him quiet, and so he was led from his prison before the band, and told what the decision of the members was.

He looked nervous, fearing the clan would not allow him to go. So it was a great relief to his strained feelings when the vote was taken and New York Nat said:

"You will go free in two weeks, and will be escorted on board the vessel by several of the band, who will see that you do not play us false.

"On the day you leave, the Queen will pay you the sum agreed upon, and, as Sykes, the traitor, was exiled for three years, so you are to be, and if you break your pledge and return within that time, I will charge you with the murder of the convict, Fatal Fred.

"Are you ready to take the oath?"

"Yes," came the low response.

He was led before the table, made to kneel, and, placing one hand upon a Bible, the other upon a human skull, while a cross was held before his face, he was told to repeat the oath after the Mascot Queen.

This he did; and then back to his prison room he was taken and left to his own meditations, with Guard as his keeper, while the band filed out as they had come, in twos and threes.

And still upon the corner watching them was the shadower, Sykes, his evil face lighted up with triumph at his success, while over and over he muttered:

"My fortune is made the day I betray the band, and my revenge is complete."

CHAPTER V.

KNOWN.

When the last one of the Ferrets had left the gloomy mansion where their young captain dwelt alone with his dog, save that Rip, the traitor prisoner, was then there, the Girl Queen removed the flesh-like mask she had worn and stood revealed as her natural self before New York Nat.

Any one seeing the two together would have observed at a glance the striking resemblance between them, and that they must stand in the relationship of brother and sister to each other.

But this secret was carefully concealed from the band, for, when New York Nat wished to cast off the mask and appear before the world, no longer as a Secret

Service Ferret, he did not intend that the Girl Queen should be known to any one of the clan as she really was.

Well born, reared in luxury in their early years, the brother and sister had, by cruel fate, been separated, brought down to poverty and a hard life, to again drift together in New York, where the boy had become the leader of the Ferret clan.

Beautiful in face and form, clever, daring, having had a rough and severe experience as a little flower girl, Olive Chandler, the Ferret Queen, was a strong and able ally of her young brother in all of his bold, and at times desperate, undertakings.

"Now, sis, I'll see you home," said Nat, when the two were left together in the mansion, and he added:

"But do you not think we have acted for the best in this case with Rip?"

"I do not see how you could do otherwise, Nat, for you could not keep him in imprisonment here."

"No, and I do not believe he will come back to betray us, at least, until it is too late to do us any harm, for I hope within a year we will be able to make ourselves known to the chief, get pardon for all of the band who should have it, let those who wish to do so enter the Secret Service legitimately, and you and I will be rich enough to go elsewhere and seek a quiet home, for that is my ambition."

"And a worthy one, Nat. But I think even now you could command a pardon by what you have done, from the chief, for those who have to have one, and you certainly deserve the greatest credit, brother, for having rescued the boys that you have from ruin, and made of them what they now are."

"But, Olive, one thing troubles me."

"What is that?"

"You remember Sykes, who turned traitor to sell us out, and whom we exiled to China?"

"Yes; he was the oldest member of the band, and the worst."

"He has his counterpart in Rip, and I am glad we have no more of their stripe in the band."

"So am I. But what of Sykes?"

"You know I never forget a face."

"Yes; you are a born detective, Nat."

"Well, I saw a man several days ago whom I am sure I recognized as Sykes."

"Oh, brother!"

"I caught his eye, and it impressed me as I met him."

"Then the memory of Sykes's face came back, and I felt sure of my man."

"I turned to shadow him, saw him hasten around the next corner—"

"Near here?"

"Yes; he was in front of this place."

"That looks bad."

"Yes, and when I reached the corner he had hailed a cab, sprung into it, turned in the other direction, and was driving rapidly away."

"It must have been Sykes, for him to attempt to escape you."

"Yes; for he recognized me, as I was my natural self; but I came in, rigged up as the professor, and when I went out it was that I met him again."

"And he knows so many of the band."

"He does, for three years has not changed them out of his remembrance."

"No."

"He has returned, I am sure, has met some of the boys, recognized them, tracked them here, and is plotting to betray us."

"But you remember he had murdered a man, so he dare not show himself."

"He will not, but he can act through a pal whom he will take in with him."

"It would be a pity, after all of our hard work and good services, to be betrayed to the chief of the Secret Service before we get ready to make ourselves known."

"Indeed it would, and I do not intend to be."

"How can you prevent it, Nat?"

"I shall see each member of the band to-morrow, tell them Sykes is back, and put them on his track to run him down."

"And if you catch him?"

"He will have to go into exile with Rip, or remain a prisoner here."

"I hope we can outwit him in some way."

"We must."

"Has he changed much?"

"Yes; for he is stouter, uglier looking, has grown a beard, his face is darkly bronzed, and he dresses like an Englishman and carries a cane; but I'll stake my life I am not wrong in my suspicion."

"You are always right, Nat. But it is late, and I must be going."

They left the house, Olive giving the prisoner the fruit she had bought from the shadower, for hers was a kind heart and noble nature, and they found the supposed Italian still at the corner.

Nat stopped to buy some fruit for Olive, and then they took a car to the upper part of the city, where, in a pretty little cottage on the Hudson River, and where the houses were few and far between, the young girl lived with a widow and her two children, who little dreamed that she was harboring in the "young artist," as Olive claimed to be, the Girl Queen of the Ferrets.

Returning to his lonely quarters, Nat found the vender still on the corner, and with nearly all of his fruit sold.

He bought a pear and went on to the house, while the shadower, seeming to feel satisfied with his night's work, prepared to depart, muttering:

"I've got 'em down fine, and I'll strike my blow only when I'm sure of success and my price, which shall be a big one."

CHAPTER VI.

THE TRAITOR FERRET.

To the surprise of New York Nat, the second morning after the meeting, as he was about to leave the house, the doorbell rang.

It startled him, for never before had that occurred save once, when a young lady had called to take music lessons, and he had been forced to tell her that his classes were full, and he could take no more pupils.

Fortunately now he was in his disguise of the German professor, so he hastened down to the door.

He had always paid his gas bills the day they were due, and all others that prevented a visitor from coming to the house, and he naturally wondered who his visitor could be.

Guard followed him to the door, as curious as was his master, for the dog also knew that the doorbell's ringing was an occurrence to be looked into.

Opening the door, the "professor" saw there a man with dirt-begrimed face, unkempt hair, a leather apron, blackened hands and clothes, and a cap pulled down over his eyes.

"Is you the professor?" he asked.

"I vas," replied Nat, in broken English, adjusting his gold-rimmed spectacles more firmly upon his nose and reading the card handed him by the man, who said:

"Ther agent give me this, and I is ter do as he says."

Nat saw that the card was from the agent from whom he rented the house,

and he recognized his writing as well, having had receipts from him for rent.

He read:

"Dear Sir—By a new law all plumbing in houses has to be thoroughly over-looked and condition reported, so please allow bearer full freedom to go over the house and oblige, Yours., etc.,

"DA CUNAH,
"Agent."

Nat was going out, but he had some time to spare, so he at once said:

"I vill you show over t'e house pretty quick."

"Not too quick, for de job's has got to be done first-class, or de city'll fine de agent—see?"

"I vas see."

"Come along mit me."

"How about dat dorg, for he look real vicious."

"He vas a pad dorg, put he don't bite you v'en I vas near."

"Den cling closer den a brother, for dem's lion's teeth he's got—dey hain't Christian—see?"

"I vas see."

"Guard, don't you vas bite t'e gentle-mans," and Nat put his hand on the man's shoulder and shook his finger at Guard, who seemed to comprehend the situation.

Down to the cellar they went, next to the kitchen, and the plumbing was looked over carefully, and then up to the first floor, where the pantry was overhauled.

Up to the bathrooms on the second and third floors, and the basins throughout the house were carefully looked at.

Twice Nat left the plumber at his work and went up-stairs in the house, Guard, however, keeping him company, and receiving a few choice morsels of food for doing so, which the man had brought with him for some reason.

When he went up on the fourth floor, the plumber started to go into the middle door, between the rear and front rooms, but Nat quickly stopped him with the remark:

"That door vas locked, but dere vas no ploombing fixin's in dere, don't you know?"

The plumber made no reply, but went to the front room, then the rear room, and closely examined the basins, when he jotted down on a slip of paper his report.

"De house is all right from cellar to top floor, so I'll tell de agent," he said, with his Bowery manner and slang.

"I vas glad, mine friend."

"Here vas a kervater of a tollar for you to get a lunch," and Nat handed him the quarter.

"You is a gent, if you is Dutch—see?" said the plumber, and with this doubtful compliment he patted Guard on the head and started down-stairs.

Nat followed closely, and the dog was close at his heels.

Reaching the door, New York Nat and the plumber left the house together, for the young Ferret was in a hurry to keep an important engagement down-town, but they went in different directions upon reaching the street, the man remarking:

"Good-by, profess. I strikes for a beer shop for a mug and a san'wich."

"That fellow is a rascal, for not once could I catch his eye; but, fortunately there was nothing for him to pick up."

"He seems to understand his business well, though, and I suppose that is why he holds his position, for men in his line are generally good, honest fellows," and so saying Nat, in his disguise of the professor, went on his way.

And so did the plumber, until he had turned the nearest corner.

There he halted and watched the receding form of the Ferret.

At last New York Nat disappeared in the distance, and the plumber said:

"Good! He has gone for a couple of hours at least, so I'll return while that savage dog remembers me."

"I'll have a look over the house and see just what there is of value there before I send the police to raid the place."

"Aha! New York Nat, clever as you are, and sharp as are your eyes, you did not penetrate either the disguise of the Dago fruit seller or the plumber."

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE FERRETS' DEN.

When New York Nat had disappeared from the sight of the shadower, the latter came around the corner and walked slowly toward the Ferrets' retreat.

"It was a clever thing for me to do, when he went up-stairs, to spring the catch on the night-latches of each door, so I could get in, for these keys I have might not have let me in."

"I was terribly afraid he might notice them, but he didn't."

"And I was scared when I handed him the card from the agent, fearing he might refuse, but he didn't."

"I played it well on the agent, too, going there as an officer of the city to tell him about the new law."

"I'm right clever, I am, but I studied Secret Service work under the very clever New York Nat himself."

"Now to enter the den, and if I get into trouble I am able to defend myself."

With this he ascended the steps, his plumber's tools in his hand, wrapped in a piece of canvas, and trying the first door, found it unlocked.

Trying the second door after he had closed the outer one behind him, he found that the catch on that also remained unsprung as he had left it.

But he started as he heard some one descending the stairs rapidly.

"I'll tell them I left one of my tools."

"But I didn't know there was any one in the house," he said.

The next moment the one he had dreaded came in sight.

It was Guard.

The man stood an instant, half in terror, half in boldness.

Would the dog attack him?

Guard came rapidly down the carpeted stairway, but without a growl or bark.

He seemed to recognize at a glance the one who had fed him, and whom his master had admitted to the house.

"Ho, Guard, old dog!" said the shadower, and he drew a revolver from his pocket in case of an attack.

Guard did recognize him, and, faithful guardian that he was, he could not be blamed for greeting the intruder as his master's friend, for had he not been shown over the house—had he not been working there? and more, he had fed him.

The traitor Ferret gave a sigh of relief when he saw that Guard was friendly, and was glad that he had reserved another bit of food for him.

Guard ate it without thanks, and the intruder, still a trifle suspicious of the dog, began to examine the lock on the door, then entering the rear of the building, he went through the pantry and began the rounds just as he had done before, for he wished to appear at least to be doing what was right.

Guard stuck closer than a brother to him, and seemed interested in his pretended work.

Up to the second floor they went, the dog with a look upon his face which plainly read that he "hoped it was all right."

Up-stairs again the shadower went, his

eye on Guard, who had a look too dangerous to take any chances with.

"He's got teeth like a tiger, and weighs over a hundred."

"It wouldn't be a fair scrap between us," muttered the traitor Ferret.

"I'm anxious to see what is in that room New York Nat said was locked, and I'll lay some plan to get the dog into a trap by closing the door on him."

"I was a fool not to have brought a little poison with me, for I've got a little more grub, and could lay the dog out if I only had the kill-quick to put on it."

With this he went through the same performance on the third floor he had on the others, pretending to examine the basins and bathroom.

He found the house furnished throughout, and yet saw that none of the lower floors had been occupied for a long time, apparently.

On the third floor was a billiard room, and this had been transferred into the lodge room of the Ferret clan.

Nat had told him it was a music room when he had before examined the marble basin there.

As the shadower now ascended to the fourth floor, Guard close at his heels, a glance upward showed him that the door of the mysterious locked room was open.

All that he could see from the stairs was that it opened into a large linen room or closet, for presses and drawers were visible.

Reaching the landing, the shadower halted suddenly, and his face turned pale.

Again he dropped his hand upon his revolver, for he distinctly heard a human voice.

The house held another occupant, after all, than New York Nat and his dog.

And that occupant was in the room that had been locked.

Guard heard the voice, which, following a yawn, muttered something, and he ran hastily into the room.

"Now is my chance!" cried the shadower, and he was about to spring forward and close the door, locking the dog in, when suddenly he checked himself.

The thought flashed through his mind that whoever was there would hear the closing of the door and come out, Guard with him, and as the dog would doubtless obey the one he knew best, he would have a hard time of it between the two.

So he did not close the door, but stood in silent watchfulness.

Then came the rattle of chains, an oath, and a step upon the floor, with an angry growl from the dog, followed by the words:

"Durn yer! I hain't goin' ter escape, so quit yer growlin', yer infernal brute."

A strange look swept over the face of the traitor shadower at these words, and he at once boldly walked into the closet which led to the room beyond.

CHAPTER VIII.

TWO OF A KIND.

The savage dog stood in the doorway leading to the inner room, and he seemed to have become cross-eyed trying to keep his eyes upon two persons at the same time.

The shadower at once halted and began to examine the lock of the outer door.

With this Guard seemed half-reassured, and when the intruder held out to him another tempting morsel, the last he had, he seemed to consider that it was all right.

"Is that you, New York Nat?" called out a voice from within the room.

"No."

"Who is yer?"

"A friend."

"Yer lies, fer I hain't got no friend in ther gang."

"I am not in ther gang."

"Yer lies ag'in."

"Why do yer say so?"

"'Cause that dog would chew yer flesh off yer bones."

"I have made friends with Guard."

"Go slow, for I thought I had onc't, but it were no go, and he'd eat me now at a word."

"I do not think he would hurt me."

"Try him on then."

"I wish to help you, for I am your friend."

"Don't take me fer no fool."

"I do not."

"You is one o' ther gang, kiddin' me."

"I am not."

"Rats!"

"I am here to help you escape."

"Taffy."

"Who are you?"

"A prisoner."

"That much I guessed."

"Any fool c'u'd guess that after what I told yer."

"What is yer name?"

"I'm Rip."

"What? Are you the kid we called Rip, who joined the band three years ago the night Foxey did?"

"I'm thet same gerloot, or maybe I'd better say durned fool."

"But you are out with the band now?"

"No, they is out with me."

"What did you do?"

"See'here, talk is cheap, so if you has anything to say of importance, jist spiel, or shut up if yer hain't."

"You are a hard nut, Rip."

"Wal, it takes a hard hammer to crack me."

"But who are you, fer you makes me weary?"

"Did you ever hear of Sykes?"

"Lordy! Ther fellow thet turned traitor and was fired off ter China?"

"Yes."

"Oh, yes. I've heerd of him."

"Well, I am Sykes."

"Yer kin outlie a tramp!"

"I tell you the truth."

"How did you git here?"

"I came with New York Nat, first."

"Has yer repented, been baptized and been took back inter ther sheepfold, or more likely, ther wolfden?"

"No, I'm here in disguise."

"Seein' is believin'."

"You don't think the dog will attack me if I come into that room, for he looks at me very uncertain-like?"

"He's like New York Nat. Yer don't know when he's goin' ter bite."

"But how'd yer git friends with him?"

"I came in as a plumber, to look over the house, and the dog saw me at work and made friends, for I had some choice chunks of beef in my clothes."

"I went out with Nat, but came back, and the dog didn't attack me; but he looks a little savage now."

"Play ther beef act on him ag'in."

"I can't, for it's all gone."

"Play a bold hand then, and walk right in."

"If he goes fer yer he'll tackle yer throat, so you jist be prepared, and maybe we kin down him together, though I is chained to my bed."

"But I'll do ther best I kin, though I guesses he'll sample us both, but it's worth a leetle blood-lettin' ter git away, and that's my game—what's yours?"

"First to set you free."

"You can't git to work any to quick ter please me."

"All right. I've been pretending to work on the lock of this door; but I'll pick up my tools and walk right in."

"I'll have my big hammer ready, but if he jumps fer me try and draw his attention some way, and I guess we kin down him."

"If we don't we'll be chewed bad, you bet."

"But sail in!"

All this time Guard had been complacently eyeing first one and then the other of the two traitor Ferrets.

He lay just within the second door, in the room where the prisoner was.

The door opened outward, and ten feet beyond it, across the closet, was the outer door leading into the hall.

It was at this door that the shadower pretended to be working upon the lock.

Having decided to act, he gathered up his tools, taking the large and sharp-pointed hammer in one hand, his revolver in the other, and placing the canvas bundle under his arm ready to drop in an instant.

Then he turned toward the inner door and called out

"I'm coming."

"All righty."

"Are you ready?"

"You bet."

"I've got my chain looped ter hit him with and break his back."

"And I've got my hammer ready and revolver."

"Don't shoot me fer ther dog!" called out Rip quickly, and just then the shadower moved forward to attempt the rescue of just such a person as he was himself, for the traitor Ferrets were certainly two of a kind.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TRAITOR'S PLOT.

Guard did not spring upon the intruder into the prison room.

The fact was the faithful dog was in a quandary.

He did not know just what to do.

He remembered, doubtless, that when Rip first became a prisoner, having known him as a friend and a member of the band, he had been tempted to eat, and thus had fallen from grace, when he had been placed by his master to watch over the young traitor.

But for the coming of the Girl Queen Rip would have escaped, and upon the coming of New York Nat the dog had received a beating that showed him how grievous had been his sin.

He had since then been most careful to let Rip know he could not again lead him into temptation.

But here was a case that seemed different.

Guard knew all the band, and seemed well aware that no one else was allowed to enter the building.

Yet New York Nat had let the shadower in, had shown him over the house, had introduced him as it were to him, Guard, and when the man had returned he did not know that he should have flown at his throat as a traitor.

Guard was a well educated, a discerning and faithful dog, but he was not quite up to the sinful working of the human mind.

So it was that, contrary to the expectations of both Rip and Sykes, he lay perfectly quiet when the latter entered the prison room.

There lay Rip upon the iron cot, to which he was made fast by a long chain attached to the manacles upon his ankles.

His evil face was all expectancy as he glanced at the visitor, and he said, after a quick look:

"You are Sykes."

"And you are Rip."

"Put it thar."

"You bet."

"Glad to see you."

"Ditto."

"Now we'll work our racket."

"Of course we will."

"Ther dorg is as quiet as a mouse."

"Yes, he knows a friend when he sees one."

"Hadn't we better slaughter him?"

"No."

"He may jump us."

"It will be time enough then to act!"

"Now what's ther game?"

"You are a prisoner."

"It looks like it, don't it?"

"What did you do?"

"Played your game."

"You were going to sell the band out?"

"I were."

"Well?"

"It didn't work."

"Why?"

"New York Nat is too durned sharp, fer he seen through me as he did through you."

"And kept you here to ship you?"

"Or ter put me ter sleep."

"The band has kept their secret well."

"You bet."

"And grown rich?"

"They is millionaires."

"Where do they keep their plunder?"

"They bank it."

"How?"

"Well, they work through a gent who stands atween them and ther chief, and ther latter banks all ther rewards to their credit."

"I see; but what made them leave the old Haunted House?"

"Got under suspicion, so Cap'n Nat rented this dive."

"It were a house murders had been done in, and had a bad name; but he don't mind a little thing like that."

"No, he is utterly devoid of fear."

"But the Girl Queen still holds on, does she?"

"Do you know who she is yet?"

"We don't."

"Have you never seen her face?"

"We never has."

"But Nat must keep some plunder here?"

"He does."

"Much?"

"He's got money hid away somewhere in the house, and some booty taken from crooks."

"Do you know where it is?"

"I kinder suspects."

"Well, you wish to get out of this, don't you?"

"Do I?"

"I can help you."

"Done."

"And you can help me?"

"I'm with yer."

"You remember I left the band under a cloud."

"I'm under ther same shadder."

"Yes, but I could not betray the band, as I was known to have committed murder."

"I'm not fergitful."

"Now I've come back, and I have a few hundreds, but want more, and we can get it by betraying the band."

"The Chief would pay big money to know who the Unknown Ferrets are, and there are old rewards out for some members of the band, as you know."

"Yes."

"Now, my idea is to work it both ways."

"As how?"

"Betray the band to the Chief, get the rewards, and, after your escape, make New York Nat pay to buy us off, but squeal on him all the same."

"That's dandy."

"But as I'll work it on Nat, you'll have to go to the Chief."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"I'm guilty as you is."

"Of murder?"

"Yes."

"Who did you kill?"

"A prisoner Nat had here."

"That's bad."

"But we'll have to find some one else as the go-between, promise him one-third, and—"

"And give him ther shake?"

"Yes, and he'll be in luck not to get worse."

"Do you know of any one?"

"That's my way of thinking."

"Yes."

"Well, we'll rob this place first."

"Oh, yes; git all we kin here, then make ther Chief pay, New York Nat next, for the band, and then light out with ther spoils."

"That is just it."

CHAPTER X.

THE COILS TIGHTENING.

The conversation made known in the preceding chapter, between the two young traitor Ferrets of New York Nat's band, shows just what villains they were, and how they were seeking to avenge a supposed wrong, because they had not been allowed to betray the Unknown Crook Catchers, and make capital for themselves out of it.

Fortunate it was for New York Nat that he had been too good a character reader, young as he was, to get more of their stripe into his band.

Their mutual plot to get money from the Chief of the Secret Service for betraying the Unknown Ferrets, from New York Nat for pretending not to do so, and then to plunder the retreat, being satisfactory to both, the next thing to be done was to plan the escape of Rip.

To free him of those irons was no easy task, and when free he must have some place to go into hiding.

So they decided that it could not be done that day.

"I've got a room not far from here, and I've been dogging the gang for days, as a Dago selling fruit."

"So I'll go and arrange for your coming to my shanty, and fix you up a disguise as a Dago also," said Sykes.

"Good!"

"This done, I'll shadow the house until I see New York Nat go out at night, and then I can go to my room, change my rig to this one, bring you your disguise, and my Dago rig back with me."

"Yes."

"I will fetch along all the keys I can to unlock those irons, and if I can't find one to fit, will bring files to cut them off."

"You bet."

"That night we'll rob the house, and arrange to have the Secret Service men to pull it, catching Nat, and as you know all the gang, we can send a note all round for a special call the next night, and have the Chief's men in hiding to nab every one of them."

"Ah! we can."

"But how about ther Queen?"

"We can't catch her."

"No."

"She must be caught, too."

"Yes."

"Well, we'll tell the Chief, or our go-between will, that if he keeps dark on pulling the retreat she'll drop in after a day or two, to find out what is the matter, and she'll be trapped too."

"That's so."

"And then we'll get rid of our go-between and light out."

"Yes."

"It's a go."

This having been talked over, Sykes at last concluded that he had better not tarry longer, so he said he would go, but would arrange all beyond the chance of making any mistake, would still shadow the house as a Dago fruit vender, and, watching his chance, would drop in again when Nat was out, bringing some keys for Rip to try to unlock his manacles with, and several ties in case none would do.

He would also bring some food for Guard, to make himself solid with that guardian, and have all arranged for a certain night, for Rip's escape, the robbery of the house, betrayal to the Chief of the Secret Service, and collecting from New York Nat the hush-money they would demand.

Rip gave Sykes the address of a man he was to see, who could arrange the price of betrayal with the Chief, and the hush-money with New York Nat, and the returned traitor took his leave, Guard escorting him to the door.

Two hours after, the supposed Italian, with his push cart, was again near the Ferrets' retreat, selling fruit, and shadowing New York Nat and his band.

"I'll know where the Girl Queen lives," he muttered, "for the next time she visits the retreat I will shadow her to her home."

It was about twilight that the shadower saw New York Nat, disguised as the professor, and accompanied by a young girl, coming along the street.

He at once recognized her as the Girl Queen, and, calling out to her, asked if she did not wish some more fruit.

"I'll get them for Rip, Nat, for he has a hard time of it there alone, and, bad as he is, we do not wish to be unkind," said Olive.

"No, indeed; get all you think he would like, sis, and I have a fine dinner here for him," responded Nat, holding up a long dinner basket, and he added, showing a bundle:

"And Guard's dinner, too."

All this the shadower heard, and he was profuse in his thanks for the liberal purchase which Olive made of him, speaking in a perfect Italian dialect, but not once raising his eyes to meet those of New York Nat.

As they passed on Nat said:

"I've seen that Dago somewhere before, sis."

"Like Chinese and Indians, they all look strangely alike to me, do Italians, Nat."

"Not to me, but that fellow is a villain, and doubtless was a brigand in his own country, coming here when throat-cutting for gold did not pay in Italy."

"You are too severe on him, brother."

"It is possible, but not probable, sis, but I have seen him under strange circumstances, I am sure, and his face will come back to me some time."

"Why, he would not look me in the face; but here we are."

They ascended the steps. Nat opened the door with his pass key, for Sykes had again sprung the catches, and lighting the hall gas, they went on up-stairs, Guard at their heels.

But Guard could not tell them what had happened, and they saw no sign of anything wrong.

Nat set Rip's dinner out for him, and fed Guard, while Olive, having put on her veil, carried in the fruit she had bought for the young traitor.

But the shadower?

Hardly had Nat and his sister entered the house, when he wheeled his push cart rapidly away to his home, several squares distant on the east side of town.

Putting his cart in a safe place, where he kept his fruit, he went to his room, and in a short while came out in the disguise of an old man.

Then he returned to the Ferrets' retreat and began to shadow it as before.

He had not been there ten minutes before New York Nat and the Unknown Ferrets' Queen came out, and he dogged them to the little cottage on the Hudson where Olive dwelt.

"Now I know the Girl Queen and where she lives."

"New York Nat, I have you now, for the trap will soon spring that catches you foul," and the shadower shook his clenched fist toward the little cottage, while in the moonlight his face looked most repulsive in its malignant passion.

CHAPTER XI.

THE TELLTALE KNIFE.

New York Nat did not remain very long at the cottage, seeming to have gone there just to escort Olive home.

Coming out, he sauntered quietly along the ridge, enjoying the beauty of the night, for the moon was at its full.

As has been stated, that part of the city was most thinly settled, many of the streets not having been cut through.

Along on the ridge ran a new boulevard, and the pavement upon one side had been finished.

Just as Nat was turning his steps toward this boulevard, being in the shadow of a grove of trees upon the ridge, he saw a form walking leisurely along the pavement toward the city.

He caught sight of a cigar light between the lips of the man, who strolled leisurely along, as though also enjoying the moonlight.

As he neared a pile of blasted rocks in the street, New York Nat saw, just as the man passed them, a form rise out of their shadow and glide rapidly along after the stroller.

In his upraised hand he held a knife, for the moonlight flashed upon the bright blade.

Instantly Nat gave a cry of warning, and sprang forward, but too late to prevent the downward blow of the assassin's knife.

There was a short struggle between the two men, one of whom, as he heard Nat's running feet, bounded away with the speed of a deer, while the other staggered a few paces and sank to the pavement.

For an instant Nat seemed about to follow the assassin, but a call from the other checked him.

"Let him go, and help me, please, for your coming saved my life."

"I am wounded, badly, I fear."

Nat instantly bent over the stranger, who he saw was a man of middle age, stylishly dressed, and wearing in his dark scarf a diamond of rare size and beauty.

Even under the exciting circumstances Nat did not forget that he was the "professor," and he said:

"Dere vas a stables two plocks away, and I helps you dare pretty quick already, mine frient."

The stranger was able to walk, with Nat's aid, and was rising, when down dropped the knife, which he had wrenched from his assailant.

Instantly Nat picked it up and thrust it into his pocket, the wounded man not noticing the act in his suffering.

The stable was reached, and a carriage just coming in was taken, and the driver given orders to go with all speed to the nearest hospital.

In a quarter of an hour the vehicle drew up there, the wounded man was assisted to a room and the best surgeons

in the hospital called to his aid, for he said:

"Save my life, and name your price."

"I have much to live for, and do not wish to die."

He spoke calmly, but it could be seen that he dreaded the worst.

Nat would have left him the moment he was in safe hands, but the stranger would not have it so, and said:

"But for you I would have been killed outright."

"Remain with me, for the present."

In vain Nat tried to get away, for he could not do so without creating suspicion against himself, he knew.

So he remained, while the surgeons examined the wound, and, after a short consultation together, announced to the wounded man that he was fatally hurt.

He received the announcement calmly, and said:

"How long will I live?"

"A few hours; perhaps a day."

"Send for a lawyer at once."

The lawyer was sent for, and in half an hour arrived, the wounded man clinging to Nat the while, and who was most anxious to get away, as he did not wish to risk his disguise before officers of the law and the coroner, who had also been sent for.

But stay he must, and he opened his eyes with surprise as the stranger said:

"I am from Colorado, and a miner of means."

"My family dwell there, but I came to New York to enjoy a few months' recreation, and was walking out enjoying the night when I was attacked."

"I have with me in my wallet just ten thousand dollars in money, and enough in my purse besides to defray all expenses, for my body is to be sent to my home."

"The wallet I wish now placed in the hands of my rescuer here, and so write it down."

"Give it to him now, and that will end it, and after he has given his deposition all I ask is that he will remain with me until I die."

There was much more that the dying man said, speaking with perfect calmness, and he gave a description of the attack upon him, his assailant's appearance, and of Nat's rescue of him.

Nat then told his story in his broken English, boldly gave his address as the professor, for he dared not do otherwise, and had the wounded man place in his hands the wallet containing the ten thousand dollars.

An hour after midnight the generous stranger breathed his last, and New York Nat was glad to slip away from the hospital, almost dazed by what had occurred.

But through all he had held to the knife the stranger had wrenched from the assassin's hand, not once referring to it either to the coroner or the captain of police who had been called.

Once within his own house he went up to his room, and drawing the blood-stained knife from his pocket, he looked intently at it for a moment, and then cried suddenly:

"This knife betrays him!"

"I know the murderer!"

CHAPTER XII.

"THE PROFESSOR."

"This looks to me like a very close call, and I must work quick and hard to show that I am what I professed to be."

"I'm in great luck with this unlooked-for legacy, but we Ferrets are not yet ready to be known."

So mused New York Nat after he had reached his home, and was pacing to and fro in his room.

There upon the table he had placed the wallet with the small fortune in it which the Colorado miner had bequeathed to him, and the knife he had gotten possession of, which had given the fatal wound.

Counting over the money, Nat saw there was no mistake. The amount which the miner had named was there.

Taking up the knife again, Nat wiped the red stains from it, and said:

"Yes, I recognized it the moment I saw it, for it was given to me by a sailor whose life I saved five years ago, and here is his name upon it."

"It was stolen from me when I was in the Rookery, and I always felt some one of the boys had taken it, so was not surprised when Keno told me he had seen Sykes with it, and Foxey said he had taken it away with him when we exiled him, and that he had known him to pawn it twice and redeem it, but never suspected it was mine."

The knife was a fine one, with a long blade of finest steel, and a handle of beautiful mosaic work, in which was the name in gold letters, inlaid:

"JACK JESSOP."

"Brig Rainbow."

It was a knife which, if once seen, was not to be mistaken.

"But the scabbard is gone, and the murderer of the miner must have it."

"And that murderer is none other than Sykes, and there is now no doubt but that he is home again and will betray us."

"He was not dressed as when I met him near the retreat, as well as I could see in the moonlight, but the murderer was of about the same size and build."

"I'll put the money and knife away now, and get a few hours' rest, for I must be out early, telling the boys to help me out in this music fake, in case the police should have me under their eye, or the Superintendent, wishing more testimony, should send for me."

"Then, too, I must look to it that my disguise is as perfect as can be, and not have it give me away."

In the wall of the room there was a small closet, and, opening it, New York Nat took hold of the shelves, gave them a steady pull, and they came out, with apparently the plastered back with them.

Behind this cleverly hidden secret nook was a space that went a foot further into the solid wall, and here it was that New York Nat kept his treasures, extra money, and the private books and papers of the band, it being known only to Olive and himself.

The little closet in front, and which appeared to be the real depth and size of the aperture in the wall, Nat had accidentally discovered one day, when trying to pull one of the shelves out, as they were too close together to allow him to put into the closet what he wished to.

To his surprise the whole closet had come out at his pull, and he at once realized that he had found a very secure hiding place for his valuables.

In with his other treasures the knife and wallet were placed, and the closet was closed and locked as before.

Then for several hours New York Nat enjoyed a sleep, when he arose, made a most careful toilet as the professor, and left the retreat in the early morning.

From the hotel where Flip was a bell-boy, the telegraph office where Parson was on duty, to Freckles' news-stand, and the district messenger office where Teaser worked, went New York Nat, at each place having a short talk with those of his band whom he saw, and giving them orders to see others of the young Ferrets and tell them what he expected of them.

Then he took the Elevated road, and

was whirled rapidly up to the station nearest to where Olive lived.

The Girl Queen had just come downstairs to her breakfast, and was surprised to see Nat, knowing that something important had happened.

He lost no time in telling her of his adventure after leaving her, his good fortune, and that he was convinced that Sykes was the murderer.

Then he added:

"Now, sis, as I had to give my address, in case more inquiries are to be made of me, and officers come to the retreat, I must be able to fully carry out my idea of a teacher of music, so I have seen some of the boys, and have given orders that they tell the others, and for several days they must drop in as pupils, and in various disguises, several of them coming disguised as girls, and you must help me in this, too."

"Just tell me how I can, Nat."

"You must at once come to the retreat, bringing a disguise as an old lady, and you are to rig up and play my mother."

Olive laughed and replied:

"Oh, I can do that to perfection, and you know how perfectly I can disguise myself as an elderly woman."

"I will be there within an hour, brother."

Then Nat hurried back, stepped in at the restaurant he was wont to frequent, and while he was eating his breakfast, another was being prepared for Rip, the prisoner.

It was just half after nine when he returned to his retreat, carrying Rip's breakfast, and Guard's, too, and began to prepare to face the officers of the law if the necessity arose for him to do so.

CHAPTER XIII.

A VISIT FROM THE CHIEF.

New York Nat was not to be caught napping.

He had been compelled to give his name and address to the police, or, that is, as he wished to be known, and he was not to be found off his guard.

He had stated that he had pupils in both vocal and instrumental music, and had rented a house cheap, where he dwelt with his mother, and their faithful companion, a dog.

This was all he said, but he was determined to be able to prove what he had reported, if any doubt arose on the subject.

He knew that a prominent man of wealth had been killed by an assassin.

He had arrived upon the scene in time to prevent a robbery, but too late to save the life of the Coloradian.

Dying, the miner had left him a small fortune.

What was more likely than that more upon the subject would like to be known than what the coroner and police captain had found out?

So it was that Nat had planned for what might occur.

When he reached his retreat he took the prisoner's breakfast in to him, and fed Guard as well.

Then he said:

"Rip, a circumstance occurred last night that may cause the police to visit me, so I wish to be prepared for them."

"I shall lock this door, and leave Guard in here with you, but I shall leave the outer door open in case a search should be made."

"Should you hear persons about the house, be careful to keep silent, for if you betray your presence you will hang for the murder of Fatal Fred, the convict, as sure as I have to explain who you are."

"You have had your breakfast, Guard

has been fed, and if you get nothing more until night you will not suffer.

"Do you understand?"

"I does, and I guesses yer has been puttin' yer foot into it, if yer's ter hev' a visit from the cops."

"If I have, I'll be able to take my foot out, unless you make a howl, and if you do, then you'll get your neck into it."

With this parting shot New York Nat left his prisoner, closed the door behind him, and left Guard in the room with him, the dog seeming to feel that he was being punished for some reason.

Taking the breakfast can and dishes out with him, Nat took them to the dining room, built a fire in the kitchen and range, and scattered things about to give an idea that they lived there, he and "his mother."

Just then Olive arrived, and, going to an upper room, she was not long in putting it in disorder, as though it was there she slept.

Making her toilet followed, and no one would have ever recognized the beautiful young girl in the one who appeared, for a gray wig, spectacles, a cap, and prim black dress certainly were a make-up which it would indeed take a keen eye to penetrate through.

Hardly had Olive finished her toilet, when there came a ring at the bell, and a youth and young girl appeared, the former carrying a banjo in a case, and the latter a roll of music.

"Why, Keno, you fooled even me, and who would know Foxey as a sweet young girl," said New York Nat, laughing.

Soon after Parson appeared as a dude seeking to learn music, and as he played the piano well he sat down and ran his fingers over the keys.

From that time on the strains of a violin, notes of a banjo, or the sound of a piano were heard in the mansion up to twelve o'clock, when Olive called out:

"A carriage has stopped at the door."

New York Nat motioned for more music, while he sprang to the window and glanced through the blinds.

"It is the Chief of the Secret Service," he said, calmly.

Then the doorbell rang, and Nat went to admit the visitor.

He knew the chief well, but the latter little dreamed who he was, or that he stood before the captain of the Unknown Ferrets, who were such a mystery to him.

New York Nat stood in the shadow, as he opened the door, and spoke as though he did not recognize his distinguished visitor, speaking with the pronounced German accent he imitated so well.

When the chief had asked if that was the home of "Professor Herman Spinola," Nat answered promptly:

"It vas, sir."

"Make yourself welcome, and come in, please."

The Chief stepped within the hall, closed the door, and said:

"I am Inspector —, Chief of the Secret Service."

"Vas dot so?"

"Vell, I vas shust as glad to see you, mine frient."

"I have called to see you about that murder last night."

"Oh, my! oh, my! I vas so troubled about dot."

"But I vill send my pupils away pretty quick, and we can talk some more apout it."

"I vas a teacher of music, don't you know?"

"I have been so informed," was the answer, and the Chief followed Nat up to the music room, the "pupils" were told their lesson was over, and then New York Nat

turned to the chief to face the severe ordeal he felt was before him.

CHAPTER XIV.

A SEVERE ORDEAL.

The Chief's keen eyes had been taking in everything they fell upon, but he saw in New York Nat only the Professor Herman Spinola, music teacher, he professed to be.

"Now, mine frient, v'at can I tell you?" asked Nat, innocently, sitting with his back to the light.

"You were the gentleman who went to the rescue of Colonel Bradford last night, I believe?"

"I vas."

"Just where did this occur?"

Nat explained the exact situation.

"Did you see the colonel before he was attacked?"

"Yes; I vas on t'e ridge in t'e woods, and he vas in t'e boulevard in t'e moonlights."

"He vas smoking a cigar and walking along slow."

"I vas walking pretty quick."

"Explain what you were doing there at that time, for it was late."

"It vas ten o'clock, mine frient."

"I vas coming from t'e house of t'e Widow Herbert, v'ere a young laty pupil of mine vas poarding mit her."

"And you saw the attack?"

"Oh, yes."

"Tell me just where the assassin was and what you saw."

Nat told the story most explicitly.

"Now describe, as well as you can, the assassin."

Nat did so.

"Would you know the man if you saw him again?"

"I vas very sure that I would."

"Even in the moonlight though it was that you saw him?"

"Vell, it vas very bright as daytimes, and I see t'e man pretty vell."

"I vas going to catch him, but t'e shentilmans call out to me to let him go and help him."

"And you did so?"

"I only help him the little v'ot I could, and yet he make me a big inheritance as if I vas his son."

"Vhy, he give me ten t'ousant dollars, mine frient, so I vas a rich mans now."

"I don't vant to take it, but he say he vas rich, and so tell the lawyer to put it down for me, and it vill help me take care of my dear mother."

"Have you that money now?"

"I vas, for my mother got it safe."

"Where is your mother?"

"She vas up-stairs."

"Can I see her?"

New York Nat stepped to the door and called in German, which he spoke a little, and there was an answer in English, and only with a slight accent.

A moment after the Girl Queen of the Ferrets entered the room as "Nat's mother."

The young Ferret presented her to the chief, and after congratulating her upon her son's behavior on the night before and his good fortune, he asked her how long they had dwelt in the mansion.

She told him, and the Chief said:

"This house has long been vacant, perhaps you know, madam, and bears a bad name."

"I have heard that it was haunted, sir, by the ghost of some one who was killed here, but of course neither myself nor my son believes such stories."

"The house was a remarkably fine one for the low rent asked, was well furnished, located well for my son's purpose,

and, standing by itself, we disturbed no one by the pupils practicing and singing."

"The former owner of this house was murdered here, or committed suicide, and a young girl died here in a most mysterious way, so the heir to it left it to go to ruin, as he could find no one to take it with such a record; but its record does not seem to trouble you, madam, nor your son."

"None in the least, sir."

"Could I look over the house, for I confess to a curiosity to do so?"

"Certainly, sir, my son will show you through it, for my years cause me to spare myself extra steps."

Nat at once rose, and the Chief was shown from cellar to top floor, the young Ferret feeling a little anxious as he heard a sound in the prisoner's room.

But he explained it by saying:

"Dat vas my dog, Guard."

"He vas a pad fellow to bite, and I locks him up in dat closet v'en my pupils vas coming."

"Would you like to see t'e dog, mine frient, for he vas awful savage, like a tiger?"

The Chief had no desire whatever to make Guard's acquaintance, and frankly said so—in fact, he seemed to show little further interest in the house after Nat's description of Guard, and remarked:

"Is he a large dog?"

"He vas as big as a pony."

"No wonder you do not fear being robbed, for I suppose he has the run of the house."

"Oh, yes! He go up, he come down, v'en he please himself."

"Where was it that you said your pupil lived whom you had been to visit, when you went to the rescue of Colonel Bradford?"

Nat gave the name and address, adding that she was not home until after three in the afternoon.

Then the Chief said:

"I am glad to have seen you, for I know now that some false theories of the case were advanced by my men who were wholly in the dark regarding it."

"I may have to call upon you some time to try and identify that murderer, if any one is arrested upon suspicion of being the assassin."

"I vill pe ready, mine frient, and if t'e family of t'e shentilmans don't vant me to haf t'e money, I vill gif it up pretty quick, for I don't vant to keep it if dere is a row, or think it vas gif to me to pay me."

"You are an honest fellow, Professor Herman Spinola, but keep the money, for but for you it would have been gotten by the murderer, and more too."

"It is a gift that will stand the test of all law," and the Chief shook hands with Nat, bade "Mrs. Spinola" good-by, and took his departure.

The moment the door closed upon him Nat said quickly:

"Quick, sis, he is going to see you, to prove conclusively I was coming from visiting you, for I am sure some of his fool detectives have hinted that I was the accomplice of the murderer."

"Run home as soon as you can change your rig, for I told him you would be in after three o'clock, and you've got an hour and a half if he calls sharp on the hour."

Half an hour after Olive left the retreat and was making all haste to her home.

But she was no longer playing the part of "Mrs. Spinola."

CHAPTER XV.

THE GIRL QUEEN PLAYS HER PART.

When Olive left the retreat she saw at the corner the Dago fruit vender, who at once called to her as a good customer.

But she said she did not care then for fruit, and, hastening on, she was soon in the Elevated cars, going up to her home.

Arriving at the cottage, she called Widow Herbert and requested that she impress upon her mind that she saw her return home the night before, and at what time, while she was accompanied by her music teacher, Professor Spinola, who came in for an hour or more and sat upon the piazza.

Mrs. Herbert was a good woman, and she had not forgotten that New York Nat had saved her two children from drowning one day in the river, and that for a while he had boarded with her, and afterward brought his sister there to live.

She loved both Nat and Olive as her own children, but "Professor Spinola" she only knew as the girl's music teacher, and, as she thought, a man much interested in her, more so than from love of music alone.

She knew that Olive had different visitors, never penetrating the disguise that Nat wore, for he was his sister's sole caller.

Mrs. Herbert had seen Olive return, the professor with her, and she said so.

That was all the Girl Queen wanted.

It was just a quarter after three when Olive saw a carriage approaching the cottage.

She was reclining in an easy chair upon the piazza, reading a book.

The Chief alighted from the carriage, threw away a cigar at the little gate, and raised his hat with marked courtesy, as he saw a beautiful young girl rise to greet him.

"I am searching for the Widow Herbert's cottage, miss, and there are no numbers on this street."

"This is the cottage, sir. Be seated, and I will call Mrs. Herbert."

"Pardon me, but are you Mrs. Herbert's daughter?"

"I am not, sir; I am Miss Chandler."

"Ah! Miss Olive Chandler?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then my business is with you, Miss Chandler."

"Indeed, sir."

"Yes. Will you be seated while we have a short talk together?"

"Certainly, sir."

"You have a beautiful view from your cottage here."

"I enjoy it, sir."

"May I ask if you know a man by the name of Professor Herman Spinola?"

"Oh, yes, sir; he is my teacher."

"What do you know of him?"

"He lives with his mother at No. — East — street."

"Yes."

"And I go there for my lessons."

"Have you known the professor long?"

"Yes, sir; for quite a while."

"When did you first meet him?"

"Years, ago, sir."

"Where?"

"On Long Island."

"My brother recommended him to me as a teacher."

"Where are your parents?"

"Pardon me, sir, but you are a stranger to me, and your visit and questioning are something quite unusual," said Olive, coldly.

"Have patience, my dear young lady, and I will fully explain later."

"Upon these conditions, sir, I will answer you."

"I am an orphan."

"And your brother?"

"Is my sole protector; but he is away, now, for he has business that frequently calls him West."

"When did you see Professor Spinola last?"

"Last night, sir."

"At what time?"

"I dined with the professor and his mother, and he escorted me home," and Olive could hardly suppress a smile at the peculiar, yet very truthful admission.

"And what time did you reach home?"

"It was early in the evening."

"When did the professor leave?"

"I will ask Mrs. Herbert, if it is important, for she knows just when he left."

"Please do so."

Mrs. Herbert was called and stated the hour.

"Which way did he go from here?"

"He generally follows the ridge along to the cross street cut through below here, and, crossing the Boulevard, goes to the Elevated station."

"Thank you."

"Now, Miss Chandler, I will tell you why I have been so inquisitive."

"Upon his way home last night the professor met with quite an adventure," and the Chief went on to tell the story of Colonel Bradford's murder as he knew it, and the good luck that had befallen the professor in the legacy left him.

"I am very glad to know of his good fortune, sir, but regret that it should have been received through the death of the generous gentleman."

"Now, Miss Chandler," resumed the Chief:

"There were detectives who, not able to find the murderer, at once jumped at the conclusion that the professor was the accomplice."

"How wicked of them."

"Yes, but men in my profession, like doctors and lawyers, often err."

"It was to prove an alibi, as it were, for the professor, that I came to see you."

"I wished to prove that there was no collusion between Professor Spinola and the murderer, and I have done so to my utmost satisfaction, and will tell you that I have seen him and his mother also, and all reports agree in his favor."

"It cannot be otherwise, sir," and Olive bowed the Chief out, and as he drove away, broke into hearty laughter and said:

"Well, I played my part well, if it is self-praise to say so."

CHAPTER XVI.

A MURDERER'S MUSINGS.

The shadower kept up his disguise of an Italian, and sold fruit from his push cart about the neighborhood, but kept generally near the stand where he could keep an eye upon the Ferrets' retreat.

It did not take him long to see that something was happening there, for apparently pupils of both sexes were going to and coming from the house regularly.

Having been one of the clan himself, he recognized them as Ferrets in disguise.

He saw the carriage stop at the door, and the Chief of the Secret Service enter the house and remain for fully an hour.

"It's that murder case last night, and New York Nat is playing some deep game, but the Chief goes there alone and there does not appear yet to be a discovery."

"I'll see what the afternoon papers have to say," mused Sykes, as he saw the Chief's carriage drive away.

When the "Telegram" came out at noon the pretended Italian bought one, and selling fruit was forgotten, as he sat down upon a stool he carried with him to read the account of the murder of the night before.

The headlines at once caught his eye:

A MURDER ON THE BOULEVARD.

A RICH COLORADO MINER STABBED BY AN UNKNOWN ASSASSIN.

NO CLEW TO THE MURDERER.

SAVED FROM BEING ROBBED BY A GERMAN MUSIC TEACHER, WHO WENT TO THE RESCUE OF THE WOUNDED MAN. A GENEROUS LEGACY GIVEN HIS RESCUER BY THE DYING MAN.

The shadower eagerly scanned the headlines and muttered an oath.

Then he read the story of the murder as told by the reporters, and found who it was that had gone to the rescue of the miner, and what had been his reward.

He also learned that the man had died from the knife wound dealt him in the back, and that the professor was none other than New York Nat, Sykes well knew.

"That boy was born for luck," he muttered, as he read the account.

"Of course, in taking the stranger to the hospital New York Nat had to give his name and address."

"He got the ten thousand in good money, and has it hidden in his retreat. That is certain."

"He knew the Chief would call, or some officer, and so prepared for them, as those pretended pupils are all Ferrets of the clan."

"Of course he played his hand so well the Chief suspected nothing, and all is well for New York Nat—at present."

"Ten thousand dollars that stranger had with him in one wallet, and hundreds more in his purse, while the report says that he had three diamond studs worth a couple of thousand dollars, diamond sleeve buttons and a ring with one stone worth a thousand."

"It was that sparkler in his scarf and the one on his finger as he passed me that dazzled my eye, and made me run ahead to down him."

"He was a fool to wear a fortune like that in sight."

"And I lost all through New York Nat."

"Well, my revenge shall be sweeter."

"But New York Nat has that money in his den and I will get it."

"I cannot act now, for he is playing a game, keeping up appearances as a music teacher, and has got Rip well hidden, I'll warrant."

"But matters will quiet down in a day or two and then I can act."

"Rip sent me to see a man as a go-between who has had to skip the town, so I will not let another into the secret, but act myself."

"In fact, after I bleed Rip for all he knows and can give up, I'll put him out of the way, for why share what I get, when it is only to take a life and have all."

"I'll play Rip for all he is worth; then down him and leave him in the place and get out, having all arrangements made to sell out the band to the Chief, and to accept Nat's bribe not to betray him, all on the same night."

"I will play them in a disguise they will never suspect."

"Yes, matters look bright for me, and—ah! what a thought comes to me!"

"I'll prepare a note—no, I'll write it in blood on the wall with my finger, leaving Rip dead there, and stating that New York Nat killed him, saying he was a traitor."

"This, supposed to be scrawled by Rip, will hang New York Nat."

"By Satan, my Patron Saint, but matters look bright for me to have my revenge and get a fortune to boot."

"But I'll go slow and make no mistake."

Such were the musings of the self-confessed murderer, and so deeply was he lost in reverie that he allowed several

customers to go by him, they not being able to attract his attention.

Thus the day passed, and curious people, reading the name and address of the professor in the papers, began to haunt the place to try and get a glimpse of the brave man who had gone to the rescue of the rich miner and gotten such a rich reward for doing so.

Reporters called to interview him, but the bell had been detached, and no one came to the door in answer to the knocks.

The "pupils" were interviewed regarding their teacher, but they soon had orders to give up their lessons until the public curiosity in the affair had passed, and so the professor's house looked deserted, while a notice on the sign read:

"Gone out of the city for a few days."

All this delayed the plot of Sykes and Rip.

The latter lay in his room in irons, with Guard as a devoted sentinel over him, and he was well aware that something had gone wrong, but what it was he could not understand, and New York Nat, who only left the house for his own and Rip's meals, told him nothing.

So the young Ferret prisoner could only bide his time and wait, feeling assured that Sykes was still shadowing the house, but dare not come in, as he must know that New York Nat was there.

Thus days passed away, and like all happenings in New York, the murder of the miner and the professor's legacy were quickly forgotten.

CHAPTER XVII.

TO BE HUNTED DOWN.

New York Nat and all of his faithful clan, from the Girl Queen down to the youngest and least important member, were under a very severe strain for the days immediately following the murder of the Colorado miner.

Wishing to remain wholly unknown, and to keep their retreat a secret, they were horrified to feel that their young captain was an object of general attention, and their rendezvous was visited by many, at least the outside of it was.

They saw the accounts in the papers, and wondered if it was possible for all this publicity to be given and their secret yet remain unknown.

But as they read of some of the detectives having suggested Nat as the accomplice of the murderer, the visit of the chief of the Secret Service to the professor, and the clever manner in which their captain had met every turn in the affair, the Ferrets gained confidence and felt that the one who so ably guided their destinies would outwit the entire police and detective force.

They had received orders to stay away from their retreat, while Olive had gone there as the "mother" of the professor, and taken up her quarters.

At last, as New York Nat had his whole clan working on the outside, it was reported to him that no more detectives or reporters haunted the neighborhood, and the public had begun to regard the affair as a dead letter.

The report had been made by Nat that Sykes had really returned, and it was sure that he was bent on mischief to his old comrades.

A description of him was given, and the Ferrets were told to be on the watch for him in any disguise they might suspect him of assuming.

The Ferret who was employed at Police Headquarters was on the watch particularly, and he had kept Nat posted as to the movements of the detectives, and reported that the retreat was no longer under watch.

New York Nat had let the members of the band know that he had secret proof of who Colonel Bradford's murderer was, and with this statement urged them the more to find the traitor Ferret, Sykes.

The family of Colonel Bradford had written the Chief of the Secret Service to offer a reward of ten thousand dollars for the discovery of the murderer, while the city also posted a sum for his capture of two thousand more, and these sums caused detectives and police to be untiring in their search and efforts to unearth the mysterious assassin.

And all this time Sykes, in his disguise of an Italian, saw officers of the law each hour of the day, and, secure in his make-up, still shadowed the retreat of the Unknown Ferrets, which he was plotting and planning to betray, when the time came for him to strike.

When Nat and his sister had talked the matter over, and they felt convinced that their retreat was no longer watched, the young Ferret captain said:

"Now, sis, I am going to stop all other work and have the whole band put upon one thing."

"What is that, Nat?"

"To hunt down Sykes."

"It is important, for if he is back, and you saw him watching the house, he means to betray us."

"I am not very anxious on that score, for he is a murderer, you know, and will have to suffer if he is known; but I do expect he will in some way work around either to force us to bribe him to silence or to sell us out."

"You would not pay a bribe?"

"Not a cent, for I would have him in closer quarters than he has us the moment he attempted to show his hand."

"But just now Sykes is most valuable to us."

"Yes; we must find him."

"The boys are doing their best; but let me tell you that he is worth just twelve thousand dollars to us."

"How do you make that out, Nat?"

"You saw that the Bradford family offered ten thousand for the murderer of the colonel?"

"Yes."

"And the city offers two thousand more."

"True."

"That is the sum Sykes is worth to us—twelve thousand dollars."

"But what has Sykes to do with those rewards?"

"To capture him is to get them."

"Why, brother, do you think Sykes was the murderer of Colonel Bradford?"

"I know it, sis."

"You very seldom make reckless assertions, Nat."

"I do not now make one, for Sykes killed Colonel Bradford, and I have the proof of it."

"Do you recognize this knife?"

"Yes, indeed; it was one a sailor gave you long ago, and you were told, when you lost it, that Sykes stole it from you."

"Yes; and he has the scabbard."

"Why, there is blood on it, Nat."

"Yes, Colonel Bradford's blood, for I did not wipe it all off."

"Where did you get it?"

"Colonel Bradford must have wrenched it from his murderer, for I picked it up where the struggle was, but said nothing about it."

"It is telltale evidence against Sykes, and if we can catch him we'll find the scabbard, which is of silver, you remember."

"Now, Sykes dogged us home that night, and, returning, saw Colonel Bradford, caught sight of his diamond, and sought to kill and rob him."

"We must find Sykes, Olive."

"We must, indeed, Nat," was the earnest response.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A CASE OF DOG EAT DOG.

"Now is my time."

So said the shadower one morning when he saw New York Nat leave the house.

Keno was with him, and Sykes had seen the latter go to the retreat half an hour before.

They halted at his push cart, and Nat said:

"Keno, I'll buy a lot of fruit for Rip, as I will be away all day, so you can take it back to him, while I go and see the Queen, but I'll meet you sharp at eleven where we said."

"Yes; I'll be there."

So Nat bought some bananas and oranges, and Keno took them back to the retreat.

This conversation the shadower overheard.

"Be away all day, will he?"

"Now is my time, and I'll go as soon as Keno leaves the house."

So muttered the shadower, and when he saw Nat disappear, and Keno soon after come out of the retreat, he wheeled his cart rapidly away.

He was soon in his own home, and rapidly making up as the plumber, for he wished to take no chances with Guard.

On his way he stopped at a butcher shop and bought some very tempting morsels of meat for the dog.

With dirt-begrimed face, his canvas roll of tools, and rough dress, Sykes looked indeed very little like the Italian he had impersonated half an hour before.

Arriving at the house, he boldly ascended the steps and pretended to be working on the door.

In reality he was trying to fit a pass-key to the lock.

He began to grow nervous and white as key after key, from a large bunch he had, failed to fit, but his face flushed with joy as the very last one he had turned in the lock.

"Why didn't I try that first?" he growled.

The second door was opened the same way.

But Sykes knew that he was to have a welcome of some kind.

He had heard a sound within, and he was well aware that the keen ears of Guard had heard the sound at the door and he was there to greet friend or foe.

He merely opened the door an inch and saw Guard.

"Good dog!"

"Fine old Guard," he said, coaxingly, pocketing his keys and bringing his bundle from the butcher shop into view.

Guard knew the voice, recognized the dirt-begrimed face, and smelt the fresh meat.

He neither growled nor sprang at the visitor.

Gaining courage, the shadower stepped within and closed the door behind him.

Guard was at once given a treat, and appreciated it.

But there was something about the savage-looking brute that warned the shadower to go slow, not to take any very great liberty.

So he began to go over the beaten track of his former visits, looking at the plumbing, until finally he worked his way upstairs, the dog close at his heels, and having been treated with another tempting bite.

Rip was lying upon his iron cot, as was usual with him, and knew some one was coming.

Was it New York Nat, or could he hope that it was his traitor pal?

He looked pale and anxious, for the time was drawing near for him to take the vessel he was to sail on, and he exiled from those he had sought to betray.

He feared that Sykes might fail him, and thus he would lose his big reward for treachery, the robbery of the retreat, the money he would get for betraying the Ferrets, and what he might find on Sykes, for he had fully made up his mind not to have two bites at a cherry—that one was enough, and that one was to be all his.

He did not care to have it a case of long division in dividing the plunder.

He had overheard a few words between Nat and Olive that he put together and made sense out of.

Nat had said simply that he did not wish Olive to bank the ten thousand until later, and then it was to be divided equally, five thousand to go as a gift to her, and the other half to be turned into the treasury of the clan.

And Olive had remarked:

"Yes; leave it in the secret closet in your room, with the other money and valuables, until you decide what to do, Nat."

That was all that Rip overheard, but it was enough for him to know that there were ten thousand dollars in the retreat, with "other money and valuables," and they were in the "secret closet in Nat's room."

Why should he divide his fortune with Sykes?

He could see no reason for doing so.

He would use Sykes to free him of his irons, to keep Guard off of him, until he could get the best of the dog in some way. They would search together for the valuables, and then he, Rip, would act.

He would watch, wait, and be guided by circumstances, but of one thing he was certain—Sykes must die!

And up to the prison room came Sykes and the dog.

The shadower had also made up his mind to act.

He, too, had decided to be guided by circumstances, but come what might, of one thing he was certain—Rip must die!

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PLOTTERS.

"Who is that?"

Rip was getting nervous. He wished to know who was outside of his room.

"Don't get scared, pal, for I ain't."

"Sykes!"

"You bet!"

He stepped into the room, while Rip sprang from the bed.

But Guard was there too and gave a savage growl of warning.

This quieted Rip instantly, and made Sykes get out his bundle of meat.

Both knew the dog would stand no nonsense.

Guard ate the meat without grace, and with no thanks to the one who fed him.

"Well, I'm mighty glad ter see yer, Sykes."

"Ditto, Rip."

"Where hev' yer been?"

"Watching and waiting."

"What has been ther matter?"

"Yer don't know?"

"No."

"Nobody has told you?"

"Not a word."

"There has been a murder."

"No."

"Yes."

"Who?"

"A gent from Colorado was killed."

"Who kilt him?"

"Ther murderer hain't known."

"I thought something was going wrong,

from all I heard about ther retreat; but what had ther gang ter do with it?"

"About ten thousand dollars' worth."

Rip started.

He had heard the ten thousand spoken of by Nat and the Girl Queen.

But he held his peace about that and asked:

"What were it all about?"

"Well, a rich gent from Colorado got knifed out on the Boulevard, and would have been robbed had not Professor Herman Spinola—"

"New York Nat!"

"Yes, he ran the murderer off, took the man to the hospital, where he died a few hours after."

"Well?"

"Before he died he just turned over to New York Nat a wallet with ten thousand dollars he had about his clothes."

"Does yer mean it?"

"Every word, and more, too, for the Chief of the Secret Service came here to see the professor, and he steered him and all ther Ferrets off his racket, and not a soul suspected him."

"But the house was looked at for days by the gaping crowd, and I had to steer clear of it."

"Well, New York Nat's a dandy."

"He is and no mistake."

"And that money?"

"He's got it in this house, of course."

"I think I know where."

"Good! We'll look it up as soon as I set you free, for I guess we'd better act now, for delays are dangerous."

"So I say."

"I've had my eyes on the house day and night."

"The Girl Queen has been here several times, and some of the professor's pupils, too."

"Where is Nat now?"

"Gone up to see the Girl Queen, after which he has an engagement with Keno, who brought you some fruit."

"Yes."

"They bought it from me, for I'm an Italian fruit vender."

"And I heard Nat say he would not be back until after night."

"He told me I might have to wait late for my grub."

"Then now is the time to act."

"You bet it be."

"I've got keys here to fit those irons, and if they don't I've got files to cut 'em off."

"Good!"

"But that dog seems to know what we are talking about, so you must get rid of him first, and I'll tell you how."

"Down in the front cellar, which is floored, there is a trap door leading down into a black hole, or lower cellar."

"Now, you go there, open ther trap, an' ther dog will come close ter look in it, so jist shove him down."

"Close ther trap on him, and his bark can't be heard, his bite won't hurt a little bit. See?"

"What's ther cellar fer?"

"I guess it was built for some place to hide plunder in, maybe."

"It's a cellar in a cellar, for beneath ther basement is ther cellar, and this is below that, and some ten or twelve feet deep, and dark as ther deuce, of course."

"It's walled around, and ther trap looks jast like ther rest of ther flooring, but New York Nat found it out some way, and took us all down one night ter see it."

"Well, it might not be just healthy fer me to push the dog in, if I made a mistake in doing so, and I'll try another plan."

"What's that?"

"Meat."

"He'll get fat on that."

"I've got a little medicine here that will quiet him."

"What's that?"

"Morphine."

"That's ther stuff."

"Yer can't perscribe fer him too quick ter please me."

Then Sykes took a folded paper from his pocket, put a white powder it contained upon another piece of meat, and threw it to Guard.

The dog caught it on the fly, half swallowed it, but changed his mind, and with a look that neither Sykes nor Rip relished, he refused to eat the meat.

"But he got ther medicine—or most of it!" whispered Rip.

"Yes, I think he got enough to lay him out," was the answer.

CHAPTER XX.

OFF DUTY.

Guard did not like the taste of the last tempting morsel given him by the shadower.

He did not seem to just comprehend whether he had been trifled with or not.

At first he gave Sykes a reproachful look, then one of anger.

The shadower hastened to make himself solid once more with the dog by taking the rest of the meat and placing it before him.

He could have killed the dog with his revolver, but he would not wish the sound heard, or to risk it.

He hoped Guard had gotten enough of the morphine to kill him.

He would soon know.

The meat the shadower had put down for him, Guard took a sniff of, his face brightened, for it did not appear like the other, and then he ate a piece.

It seemed good.

So he tried another piece.

But he seemed to be very slow in his movements now.

"It's telling on him, Rip."

"I guess."

"Yes, he won't give us no trouble in a few minutes more."

"I hopes not."

"Now let me try to unlock your irons."

With this Sykes sat down upon the foot of the bed and began to try manacle keys to find one to fit.

"Look at ther dorg," said Rip, in a whisper, as Guard's eyes closed.

"He is getting sleepy."

"You bet."

After working still longer with the keys, Sykes said:

"I think I've got it, for this half turns it."

"Good!"

"See ther pup!"

"He's asleep."

It was true.

The faithful dog was asleep, and still sitting up.

A movement of Rip and a rattling of the chains caused him to open his eyes.

But they closed at once and he sank down upon the floor.

"He's fixed."

"Dead?"

"Well, if he is not, he's dead to us, so we've got nothing to fear from him."

"And you've unlocked the irons?"

"Yes, this key fits."

With this the manacles were taken off of Rip's ankles, and another key soon freed his wrists of the handcuffs, for New York Nat made doubly sure of his prisoner when he expected to be gone for any length of time.

Rip sprang from the bed and stretched himself, a look of joy upon his evil face.

Then he said, in a sly way:

"I'm free, Sykes, thanks to you."

"Yes."

"And the dog is dead."

"Maybe so."

"But he's off duty, sure, and we've got nothing to fear from him."

"Let's celebrate."

"How?"

"I've got a little something in a flask they didn't find."

"Try a pull."

He took from a pistol pocket in his breeches a small silver flask, and handed it to Sykes.

"It's rare old stuff."

"Well, I don't drink much, for I'm afraid of getting drunk and telling something; but I'll try a pull."

"Don't be afraid of it, for it's first class."

Sykes took a liberal pull at the flask and handed it to Rip, who turned it up with the remark:

"Here's thanking you, pal."

The flask was then pocketed and Rip said:

"Now we'll begin our search, and we'll begin with New York Nat's room."

They went into the room of the Ferret captain, and Sykes said:

"Don't you know nothing about the hiding places of the plunder, for he must have plenty here."

"I kin only guess."

"But ter save time you take one room an' I another."

Sykes tried to speak, but his tongue seemed thick.

Then his head seemed to feel strange.

Sitting down quickly he asked, with an effort:

"Did I drink much of that liquor, for I've a light head, and it affects me."

"Not much—"

"I'll get you some water."

"No—no—don't leave me—Rip! You have poisoned me, and I'll kill you—"

He tried to rise and to draw a revolver, but Rip bounded through the door, and Sykes, staggering to his feet, fell heavily his full length upon the floor.

"Now I'll fix him," cried Rip, and he ran to his prison room, seized the manacles unlocked from his wrists, clasped them heavily upon Sykes, who was breathing heavily.

"Ther dog's off duty, and he's off duty."

"Now I kin act, and I guess I gets all ther boodle."

"New York Nat's awful clever, but ther cleverest of men makes mistakes, and he made one when he didn't think ter take thet poisoned brandy away from me after I give a dose of it to Fatal Fred, ther convict, thet put him ter sleep."

"Now I'll see what's ter be done, fer I'm kinder upset," and the young crook looked scared and bewildered.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE BOODLE.

Rip was as merciless as Sykes where his own advancement was in question.

He was free, and he thought nothing of the means he had taken.

That he had not killed his brother crook was his dread, for Sykes had not appeared to take a large drink from the flask.

He had no desire to have him come around and raise a scene, and so, after standing a few moments in thought and to recover his nerve, he said:

"I'll do it."

A plan had flashed upon him as to what was best for him to do.

He therefore went to where the shadow lay.

He seemed not to breathe as Rip placed his hand upon his pulse and felt no throbbing.

Taking the form up in his strong arms, for he was a young athlete, he bore it

down-stairs, flight after flight, until he reached the cellar.

There he halted and lighted a lamp.

By its light, for all was dark there, he began to search the traitor Ferret.

He went leisurely to work, taking the precaution to allow nothing to escape him.

Sykes had been his own banker, carrying with him all he possessed.

He had hidden his money in pockets made in his undershirt, next to his flesh.

Out of a couple of these pockets Rip took seven hundred dollars in bills, and a diamond scarf-pin of unique design sticking to the scarf, which showed that it had been wrenched from the neck!

The pin was a solitaire diamond of large size, set in a pair of eagle-claws.

This Rip seemed to greatly admire, but he thrust it into his own pocket with the money, while he remarked:

"It's a good find. I'm in more luck than I thought."

"He carries a fine watch and chain, too, for a crook—stolen, of course."

"Now, as he seems to be dead, I'll put him in the cellar and let the cops find him, and that will hang New York Nat, for as soon as I git away I'll send 'em word ter raid the place."

"I'm sorry I can't git no dust fer my information, but it better be what I has and be satisfied, than ter reach out fer more and git my neck stretched."

"No; I'll hunt fer what boodle dere is here, and git for all I'm worth—see?"

With this he sought the trap-door he had spoken of, raised it as he had seen New York Nat do when he showed it to the band, and at once the dark, cavernous chamber below was revealed.

Swinging his lantern into it, he saw that it was about fifteen feet square, a dozen feet deep, and had a dirt flooring, the walls being of stone and the ceiling, which was also the floor of the cellar proper, was heavy and double, apparently built so to deaden sound from below.

In the dungeon-like place he saw a stone pitcher, which caused him to remark:

"The place has been a prison for some poor devil. I'm mighty glad New York Nat didn't keep me in there; but then, he hain't that kind, for he hev' treated me most kind, and so hev' the Girl Queen."

"But for all that, I'll hang New York Nat, if I kin."

With this the young scamp, without waiting longer, deliberately rolled the handcuffed and apparently dead Sykes over into the dungeon.

The form fell with a dull thud, and, bad as he was, Rip shuddered.

Quickly closing the trap, he began to pick up what he called his "boodle," and which lay upon the floor of the cellar.

The money and scarf with the diamond pin he had already pocketed.

But there was a knife stuck in a peculiar scabbard, a watch and chain, and a forty-four caliber revolver.

Putting out the lantern, he then made his way to the upper part of the house again, and went into the room which New York Nat occupied.

There he stood for a moment looking about him, and then began a thorough search of the room.

A table with a drawer in it was closely looked through; then the bureau; next a closet, and yet he failed to see the identical secret hiding place which the Girl Queen and New York Nat had referred to in what he had overheard.

He saw a trunk, and the keys he had taken from Sykes soon opened it.

There was not much of value in it, but the clothing he saw there was good, and the sight of it suddenly impressed the young crook with the idea that he could alter his appearance greatly for the better.

He saw a pair of gold eyeglasses, a wig of blond hair, a high hat that just fitted him, a handsome suit of clothes, a pair of well polished boots, some shirts, a cane, umbrella, and a fine alligator satchel.

"I'll be a reg'lar dude, and if I don't talk no more than I has ter, I'll pass."

"I'll just fit myself up from this lay-out; but fu'st I must find ther boodle."

"It were in a secret closet, they said."

"Now, thet hain't no secret closet yonder, and ther must be another."

"I'll find it, fer its wu'th a fortin' ter me."

He made another thorough search, and was beginning to get alarmed at his not being able to find it, when his eyes fell upon a looking glass hung upon the wall.

"Maybe it's behind that glass," he said, and stepping forward he took hold of the glass to look behind it.

By accident he took hold just in the right place, the glass swung out on hinges, revealing the closet behind, with a few things on the shelves.

He grasped the shelves; they yielded to his pull; and he gave a yell of delight at what he beheld.

The "boodle" was before him.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN THE MOMENT OF SUCCESS.

There was the "boodle" right before his gloating eyes.

Accident, good luck, and what he had overheard, had guided him to the treasury-keep.

He stood spellbound. There was the great wallet of money.

He opened this first, and he could hardly keep back a yell of delight as he saw the large sum of money.

There was other money there, too, a box of trinkets, the books of the clan, some paper, and the tin treasure box that the Girl Queen, as treasurer of the Ferrets, used to keep the expense money in.

Rip was almost crazed with exultation over his big find.

He seemed to forget all danger, and sat down to count over the money.

He did not realize that time was flying—that the day was nearing its close.

He did not give a single thought to the silent form he had rolled down into the dungeon.

All that he thought of was his wealth.

He suddenly found himself in possession of thousands of dollars and other booty of value.

It completely demoralized him for a long while.

Then it flashed upon him that he was in danger.

He sprang to his feet, put the booty and money into the satchel, and began to make his toilet.

The suit of clothes was a good fit, and with a white shirt on, a flashy necktie, high hat, the gold eyeglasses, and the cane and umbrella in his hand, while the valuable satchel was hung over his shoulder, he did not look unlike a fast youth on his travels.

"I must keep my mouth shet, for as sart'in as I open it I'll put my foot into it," he muttered, seeming to fully realize that he was an uneducated tough of the roughest kind, though he did play his part well in his borrowed plumage.

When he was all ready he started out of the room, and had just reached the second landing, when he was startled by something very like a howl.

It came from the upper floor, the prison-room he knew so well, and where he had left Guard, as he believed, dead.

The sound was repeated, and told the young crook that the dog was recovering from the effects of the morphine, and be-

ginning to realize that he had been badly treated—that something was wrong.

Then, too, if able to see around him, Guard must have discovered that his prisoner was gone—that the iron cot was empty—that the manacles had been shaken off.

For a moment the young traitor Ferret halted, half-inclined to go back and shoot the faithful dog.

But he thought better of it, and felt that he could reach the street before Guard was able to pursue.

So, down-stairs he went, his pace quickened by another yet stronger howl from the dog.

He had reached the landing and was hastening toward the door, when he heard a click! click!

Some one was coming in!

With terror in his face and trembling limbs he fled back to the rear and down the stairs to the basement.

He would wait there until whoever came in had passed on up-stairs and then he could make his escape.

To escape from the basement he knew was impossible, for the end door was doubly locked and Nat held the keys, while all the windows had a heavy iron grating over them, and an iron door closed both the front and rear entrances on the ground floor.

No; he must make his escape only by the front door.

So there he stood, trembling with fright, the sweat dropping from his face, and his teeth clicking together with a nervous chill.

In his despair he felt for his revolver—the one that had been Sykes'.

He reeled with faintness when he found that he had not put it in his pocket when changing his clothes.

The knife, too, in its unique scabbard, was gone!

He had left that, also, up-stairs.

Then he knew he could not defend himself.

He heard some one come in and the door close.

"It is getting dark, so I'll light the gas," he heard, and the snap of a match followed.

Then, to his renewed horror, he heard that dismal howl of the dog from above stairs.

What did it mean to him—that foreboding dog-wail?

The words of the one who had entered came distinctly to his ears, and they proved that more than one had come into the house.

"Something is wrong with Guard. Wait here until I go and see, but be on your guard!"

It was New York Nat's voice he heard, and then followed the rapid step going on up-stairs.

But some one remained on watch.

Who was that some one?

He did not know, but he did know that all the Ferrets went armed.

In the very moment of success death and despair stared him in the face!

A moment after a call came from above:

"Rip has escaped!"

"Guard has been drugged, but is coming round all right."

"Guard the door until I come down!"

"All right, Nat, I will!"

It was the Girl Queen who answered, but Rip, the traitor Ferret, knew that she was as dangerous to face as any one of the clan.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FATAL CATCH-LOCK.

In his despair Rip at last plucked up courage to face Olive and try to dash out by her.

He arose from where he had been sitting, but his knees trembled so he could hardly walk.

Then he heard New York Nat call out: "I will come down and search from cellar up, Olive."

That settled it with Rip. He hastily descended to the cellar, where was a hiding place which he well knew.

It was a refrigerator in the wall, which he did not believe New York Nat had ever noticed.

Rip had opened it once and recalled that it was large enough to conceal him.

So he staggered rather than ran toward it, sticking to his satchel of booty, however, like grim death.

He reached the spot, opened the door and found that the space within went back several feet—that it was quite roomy enough, in fact, to hold half a dozen men.

He left the door open a moment to admit fresh air, but hearing a step on the stairs, he sprang in and pulled to the heavy panel.

He heard a click, and knew that it was locked—that the catch had caught.

With trembling fingers he felt for a handle on the inside, but, to his dismay, he could not find one, and then the horrible truth dawned upon him that there was no handle from the inside, where none was needed, and that he had been caught like a rat in a trap.

More still, he knew that within that air-tight place he must die of suffocation.

There was a wastepipe hole, it was true, but he could get air through that only by holding his nose close to it, and if not found he would surely die—be entombed alive.

In the mean time New York Nat had come down stairs, and there Olive met him with white face.

"Nat, some one is here, for I heard a sound in the basement. Can the police have raided the place, do you think?"

"It may be, but if so, we must face the consequences, admit that we are the Chief's Unknown Ferrets, point to our splendid secret services, and ask pardon for those who have to receive it."

"Yes, it is all that we can do; but then, our work is not yet finished. You say that Rip has escaped?"

"Yes, his manacles were unlocked and he is gone."

"And Guard was poisoned?"

"Drugged, I think; but he is coming round all right, I guess."

"Nat, the police would not drug the dog."

"That is so. Rip must have been helped by some one outside—ah! I have it!"

"Well, brother?"

"Who knows the working of our band, outside of it, but Sykes? He has been shadowing us, when we go out and come in, and it must be that he has dared to enter here in our absence and so rescued the traitor."

"If that is so we must leave here to-night, before they can inform upon us. I will post all of the band so that none of them will be caught."

"But first let us see if any one is here, for they may not have had time to get out."

"You remain here, sis, on guard. Stand here inside the parlor door, where you will not be seen, and guard the stairs, should any one be up there."

"I will go to the basement and cellar and search there."

"Take Guard with you."

"He is hardly able."

"Call him, for moving about will help him if he has been drugged."

"You are right," and Nat gave a call.

A low yelp answered it, and then Guard was heard coming.

He was so unsteady on his feet that he fell down the first flight which he started to descend, but the fall seemed to arouse him rather than to hurt him, and he made his way down to the first floor, though weak and unsteady on his feet.

He seemed a trifle dazed, but followed New York Nat at his command, and they went down-stairs to the basement together.

With Olive on guard at the only entrance and exit, Nat felt safe and proceeded to the cellar to begin his search and to make it thorough.

Down in the cool cellar Guard seemed to rally quickly, and gave a low whine and ran at once to the trap door to the dungeon, sniffing about the spot where Sykes had lain.

"Aha! Down there, is he, Guard?" and New York Nat hastily cast off his blond wig, spectacles and whole disguise as the professor, and prepared himself for work.

"Rip knew of this dungeon, and I will see if Guard is not right."

"Yes, good dog, you shall have your revenge if they are in there," and New York Nat turned to get the lantern which he always used when in the cellar or dungeon below.

It was not where he had left it, but near, and with lighted matches he soon found it.

Lighting the lantern, he muttered:

"This has been used recently. Now for the trap."

With this he raised the trap door, keeping out of sight lest a shot from the dark depth of the dungeon should do him harm.

CHAPTER XXIV.

NEW YORK NAT'S DROP.

But there was no sound down in the depth of the dark earth-chamber.

Guard was rapidly regaining strength and full possession of his faculties, and crouched upon the edge of the trap, looking down into the darkness beneath.

As he simply uttered a low whine, it seemed to convince New York Nat there was no danger there, so he held the lantern over and peered down.

He could see but indistinctly, yet beheld what appeared to be a human form.

"I will just take a drop into the black-hole and see what it is," he decided, promptly.

With this he took his long silk neck-scarf, ran it through the wires at the back of the lantern, and tied it about his waist.

By so doing the lantern hung just in front of him and gave him the use of both hands.

Slipping over the edge of the trap opening he then swung himself around and hung by both hands a moment.

Guard crouched by the trap and watched his master's movements intently, whining in a low, nervous way.

As he swung by his hands, preparatory to dropping into the dungeon, New York Nat beheld the form of a man lying below, and with manacles upon his wrists.

The lantern's rays fell full upon the silent form that Nat now beheld almost beneath his feet.

Dropping into the dungeon, the daring young detective took the lantern from about his waist and flashed it into the face of the motionless man.

"By Great Caesar's ghost! It is the plumber I showed through the house some days ago."

Then he knelt and placed his finger upon his pulse.

"Still as death," he breathed, solemnly.

Bending over, he laid his head upon the breast, his ear over the heart.

There was no pulsation, no throb.

"He is dead, that is certain, and yet hardly cold.

"How did he get into the house?"

"Who killed him?"

"What does it mean?"

Unable to answer these questions, New York Nat gave a shrill signal whistle.

It was answered by a like call from Olive.

"Lock the doors, put the keys in your pocket, and come here," called out Nat, using his hands as a trumpet.

Then, as Olive answered, he called out:

"Call Guard and leave him by the door also, for no one must get out!"

Olive called the dog, and he went off quickly to obey.

A moment after, she appeared at the trap.

"Sis, the plumber who went through the house the other day is here, so please lower me a rope that is in the kitchen."

"Yes, Nat."

A few minutes later one end of a stout rope was lowered, and, making it fast around the body, Nat told Olive to tie the other end about a post.

This she did, and he went up hand over hand, and then began to draw the body up.

It was not an easy task, but it was done, and, carrying it up to the kitchen, he laid it upon the floor and lighted the two gas jets there.

Then he looked fixedly into the face of the dead man, took a towel, and, wetting one end at the sink, washed the face off, and said:

"Olive, the plumber was our worst foe."

"Who, Nat?"

"Sykes!"

Olive started, and, coming forward, gazed fixedly into the face a moment and said:

"You are right. I recall his face now, perfectly."

"And Nat?"

"Yes."

"Don't you think he looks strangely like the Italian fruit seller?"

"Indeed I do, and I believe he and the supposed Dago are one and the same."

"Yes, his face comes back to me, now, and I recall the resemblance which I could not before discover, though I was sure we had met before."

"He is Sykes, and the pretended Italian, and in some way he got into this house and rescued Rip."

"But who killed him?"

"Like as not Rip, who has no doubt robbed us and escaped."

"Oh, brother, I will—listen to that voice!"

Both listened, and a muffled cry came to their ears.

Nat seized the lantern and ran down to the cellar, for the sound surely came from there.

But he could not trace the sound.

"Call Guard!" cried Olive, who had followed.

A call brought the dog hurriedly to them.

His ears, also, caught the sound. He listened attentively for a few seconds, and then bounded into the front cellar directly to the huge refrigerator built into the wall.

Nat followed quickly, the muffled cries coming more distinctly as he advanced, and he cried:

"Some one is in there, Olive!"

The dog was now whining piteously in

front of the heavy door, and, seizing the handle, New York Nat turned it and as he threw open the door the form of a man rolled out upon the cellar floor.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SECRET OUT.

At first neither New York Nat nor Olive recognized who it was that had rolled out of the refrigerator and lay at their feet, all limp and moaning; but, as he flashed the lantern upon him, Nat recognized his own suit of clothes, his hat and his satchel.

"Oh, sis, it is Rip!"

"It is, indeed."

"And he it was you heard in the cellar. It must have been he that was just going out when we came in, so he ran here to hide, but once in he could not get out, so shouted for help, as he must have been suffocating."

"He is not hurt, is he, brother?"

"I think not, but terribly scared, and half smothered."

"Come, Rip, get up, for you are all right now."

The young crook's eyes opened, there was a wild light in them, and he shrank away while he cried:

"I did not kill Sykes. He drank the poisoned liquor himself, indeed he did, and I only put him down there."

"He drugged the dog, indeed he did, and—oh! oh! don't rob me of my money! please don't, for I want it so bad—so bad!"

"Sister Olive," said Nat, very seriously.

"Yes, Nat."

"His terror in that place has turned his mind, and Sykes lies there dead, so I must have help, but I would not leave you here alone, so you go at once to the nearest car and hurry down to Mr. Canfield, our good friend, and ask him to come here at once. Tell him to ring the bell twice, so I will know who he is."

"Then go after Keno and have him come up with several of the boys, you returning as soon as you have sent him after the others."

"I will go at once, Nat—but you?"

"I will take Rip back to the prison room and see that he is comfortable."

Olive at once started on her errand, while Nat, supporting Rip, who was muttering to himself, aided him up-stairs.

Again in his room, the young crook glanced about him and dropped down upon his bed.

But New York Nat, determined to be on the safe side, put irons on his wrists, and the manacles again upon his ankles.

Then he searched him and found the money of Sykes which he had secreted about him, the silver flask which he had seen when Rip had poisoned the convict, Fatal Fred, and which he had forgotten to take away from him, but which was now empty, save for a little of the fluid, which Nat intended to have examined.

The satchel full of what he had found in the secret closet told the Ferret captain that Rip had supplied himself well with all he had found of value, and a search in his own room revealed the crook's clothes and Sykes' revolver and knife.

"Ah! Here is the scabbard to that knife, though he has another one in it now."

"It is all plain to me now, that Sykes got into the house in some way, set Rip free, poor Guard not troubling him as he had seen me admit him as the supposed plumber some days ago."

"He drugged Guard, and once he was free, that arch-fiend Rip simply gave him a drink of that poisoned liquor, deter-

ined he would share with no one the money he knew was here.

"Then he threw the body into the dungeon, dressed himself up to escape, but the coming of Olive and myself caused him to hide in the refrigerator, and the fright drove him mad, if he is not shamming, which I half believe is the case."

"Yes, it is all plain now; but what can I do with the body of Sykes, or with Rip, if he has really gone mad?"

"Mr. Canfield can advise me, I know."

In little over an hour after Olive's departure, Sherman Canfield arrived, ever ready to serve his young Ferret friends, and to again act as the middle-man between the Secret Service Chief and the Unknown Ferrets.

Nat sat down in the parlor with him, to await the return of Olive, and told his friend the whole story from beginning to end—stating that he had a corpse in the house, and a crazy crook as well.

"You have been away the past week, Mr. Canfield, or I would have kept you posted, as I always do; but now you know all, so what am I to do? This Sykes is the murderer of Colonel Bradford, for here is the scabbard of the knife which I picked up that night of the murder, but the scabbard has another knife in it."

"He had also with him this scarf and pin, which he tore from Colonel Bradford's neck, and in the struggle the colonel got hold of a button on his coat and pulled it off, with a strip of the cloth, so when I find where Sykes lived, we may discover that torn coat and match the button with the others, for it is a very odd pattern, and the Chief has it."

"Your argument is most convincing, Nat, but how are you to account to the Chief for the death of Sykes, even though he was Colonel Bradford's murderer?" asked Sherman Canfield, anxiously.

"That is just the question, sir, but let me give you another proof, while I think of it."

"The colonel said that he grasped the man by the neck, and the nails of his four fingers on his left hand tore the flesh, he was sure, pretty badly."

"Now, Sykes' neck has on the right side, four deep scratches."

"Well, he is the man, say; but what shall we tell the Chief?"

"I will have the body taken out to-night, sir, just as we did with the corpse of Fatal Fred; one of my boys can drive the carriage, and, if you will, you can go to the Secret Service Chief and tell him to send to the Morgue to find Colonel Bradford's murderer, for I will go in disguise as a detective and deliver the body there."

"The very thing, Nat!"

"And if you will tell the Chief you will bring the coat, knife, scarf and diamond pin to him as proof that you have your man, we will find out where he lived and get the other things needed."

"And about his death?"

"Tell him, sir, that the Unknown Ferrets ran him down, but to be taken, his life had to be forfeited, as in a leap he made his neck was broken, for I notice that such is the case, and this was doubtless done by Rip's throwing him into the cellar."

"That will go all right; but now to this mad crook, if he is not playing possum."

"Yes, sir."

"I can take him to a private asylum for you, where he will be safe."

"The very thing, Mr. Canfield."

"Now we are all right once more!" cried Nat, just as Olive returned; while soon after three of the Ferret clan arrived at the retreat.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CONCLUSION.

The plan suggested by New York Nat worked like a charm.

Keno and the Ferrets who had come with him heard the strange story Nat had to tell and viewed the body of Sykes and visited the prisoner, Rip.

That the latter was not shamming, but had really been crazed by his fright, there was no doubt in the minds of any of those who saw him.

But his case could wait; the body of Sykes was first to be looked after.

So Keno went after a carriage, to be himself the driver, while Sherman Canfield went down to Headquarters to have an officer sent to the Morgue after the body.

The carriage came, the body was carried out between Nat and Parson, and, entering the vehicle, the two Ferrets, in detectives' uniform, were driven away, while the other Ferret remained at the retreat with Olive until her brother's return, the Girl Queen wearing her mask as she always did.

"A body ordered here by the inspector, who will send an officer with orders what to do," explained New York Nat, abruptly, and the body of Sykes was turned over to the keeper, while the Ferrets drove rapidly away.

Back to the retreat they went, and while two of the boys remained with Rip, Nat went home with Olive, Keno returning the carriage to the stable where he had hired it.

"We have had a very narrow escape all round, Nat, but we have not been beaten, and I now begin to believe we never will be until you decide to let the Chief know who the Unknown Ferrets really are," said Olive, when they had reached her home.

"Well, sis, we will not give in until we are ready to do so," was Nat's reply, and bidding his sister good night at the door, he started upon his return to the retreat.

The next morning they found the Italian fruit seller missing from his regular haunt, and a close search soon tracked him to where he had lived.

Saying that he had been sent for his luggage, and giving the landlady the fruit on hand, and the push cart, along with another week's rent, Nat had no trouble in getting what he went after, and the traps were soon safe in the retreat.

That night Nat visited Sherman Canfield and found that the Chief had Sykes' body in keeping, and had said if the coat could be produced from which the button and strip had been torn, that with the other proofs, would convince him that Colonel Bradford's murderer had been found and the rewards would be paid.

Nat then handed over the coat, and the next day it was placed in the Chief's hands by Sherman Canfield, the great detective remarking:

"It is to your Unknown Ferret allies, Mr. Canfield, that I owe this great triumph, and the rewards are subject to your order."

Several days after, as there was no doubt that Rip had lost his mind, Mr. Canfield took him, accompanied by Keno, to a private asylum in the country, and there left him as an inmate—New York Nat paying all expenses.

The Unknown Ferrets had again downed all foes, and, safe in their retreat, continued still to astound the Secret Service Chief with the crimes which they unearthed, the mysteries they solved, and the criminals they handed over to justice.

THE END.

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